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THE MILLER OF OLD CHURCH

THE MILLER OF OLD CHURCH

BY

ELLEN GLASGOW

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THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

TO MY SISTER

CARY GLASGOW McCORMACK

IN LOVING ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF HELP
AND SYMPATHY THROUGH MANY YEARS

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BOOK FIRST

JORDAN'S JOURNEY

THE MILLER OF OLD CHURCH*

CHAPTER I

AT BOTTOM'S ORDINARY

IT WAS past four o'clock on a sunny October day, when a stranger, who had ridden over the "corduroy" road between Applegate and Old Church, dismounted near the cross-roads before the small public house known to its frequenters as Bottom's Ordinary. Standing where the three roads meet at the old turnpike-gate of the county, the square brick building, which had declined through several generations from a chapel into a tavern, had grown at last to resemble the smeared face of a clown under a steeple hat which was worn slightly awry. Originally covered with stucco, the walls had peeled year by year until the dull red of the bricks showed like blotches of paint under a thick coating of powder. Over the wide door two little oblong windows, holding four damaged panes, blinked rakishly from a mat of ivy, which spread from the rotting eaves to the shingled roof, where the slim wooden spire bent under the weight of the creeper and of innumerable nesting sparrows in spring. After pointing heavenward for half a century, the steeple appeared to have swerved suddenly from its purpose, and to invite now the attention of the wayfarer to the bar beneath. This cheerful room which sprouted, like some grotesque wing, from the right side of the chapel, marked not only a utilitarian triumph in architecture, but served, on market days, to attract a larger congregation of the righteous than had ever stood up to sing the doxology in the adjoining place of worship. Good and bad prospects were weighed here, weddings discussed, births and deaths recorded in ever-green memories, and here, also, were reputations demolished and the owners of them hustled with scant ceremony away to perdition.

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* The scene of this story is not the place of the same name in Virginia.

From the open door of the bar on this particular October day, there streamed the ruddy blaze of a fire newly kindled from knots of resinous pine. Against this pleasant background might be discerned now and then the shapeless silhouette of Betsey Bottom, the innkeeper, a soft and capable soul, who, in attaching William Ming some ten years before, had successfully extinguished his identity without materially impairing her own. Bottom's Ordinary had always been ruled by a woman, and it would continue to be so, please God, however loudly a mere Ming might protest to the contrary. In the eyes of her neighbours, a female, right or wrong, was always a female, and this obvious fact, beyond and above any natural two-sided jars of wedlock, sufficed in itself to establish Mrs. Ming as a conjugal martyr. Being an amiable body — peaceably disposed to every living creature, with the exception of William — she had hastened to the door to reprimand him for some trivial neglect of the grey mule, when her glance lighted upon the stranger, who had come a few minutes earlier by the Applegate road. As he was a fine looking man of full habit and some thirty years, her eyes lingered an instant on his face before she turned with the news to her slatternly negro maid who was sousing the floor with a bucket of soapsuds.

"Thar's nobody on earth out thar but young Mr. Jonathan Gay come back to Jordan's Journey," she said. "I declar I'd know a Gay by his eyes if I war to meet him in so unlikely a place as Kingdom Come. He's talkin' to old Adam Doolittle now," she added, for the information of the maid, who, being of a curious habit of mind, had raised herself on her knees and was craning her neck toward the door, "I can see his lips movin', but he speaks so low I can't make out what he says."

"Lemme git dar a minute, Miss Betsey, I'se got moughty sharp years, I is."

"They're no sharper than mine, I reckon, and I couldn't hear if I stood an' listened forever. It's about the road most likely, for I see old Adam a-pintin'."

For a minute after dismounting the stranger looked dubiously at the mottled face of the tavern. On his head the sunlight shone through the boughs of a giant mulberry tree near the well, and beyond this the Virginian forest, brilliant with its autumnal colours of red and copper, stretched to the village of Applegate, some ten or twelve miles to the north.

Starting southward from the cross-roads, the character of the country underwent so sudden a transformation that it looked as if man, having contended here unsuccessfully with nature, had signed an ignominious truce beneath the crumbling gateposts of the turnpike. Passing beyond them a few steps out of the forest, one found a low hill, on which the reaped corn stood in stacks like the weapons of a vanished army, while across the sunken road, the abandoned fields, overgrown with broomsedge and life-everlasting, spread for several miles between "worm fences" which were half buried in brushwood. To the eyes of the stranger, fresh from the trim landscapes of England, there was an aspect of desolation in the neglected roads, in the deserted fields, and in the dim grey marshes that showed beyond the low banks of the river.

In the effort to shake off the depression this loneliness had brought on his spirits, he turned to an ancient countryman, wearing overalls of blue jeans, who dozed comfortably on the circular bench beneath the mulberry tree.

"Is there a nearer way to Jordan's Journey, or must I follow the turnpike?" he asked.

"Hey? Young Adam, are you thar, suh?"

Young Adam, a dejected looking youth of fifty years, with a pair of short-sighted eyes that glanced over his shoulder as if in fear of pursuit, shuffled round the trough of the well, and sat down on the bench at his parent's side.

"He wants to know, pa, if thar's a short cut from the ornary over to Jordan's Journey" he repeated.

Old Adam, who had sucked patiently at the stem of his pipe during the explanation, withdrew it at the end, and thrust out his lower lip as a child does that has stopped crying before it intended to.

"You can take a turn to the right at the blazed pine a half a mile on," he replied, "but thar's the bars to be pulled down an' put up agin."

"I jest come along thar, an' the bars was down," said young Adam.

"Well, they hadn't ought to have been," retorted old Adam, indignantly. "Bars is bars whether they be public or private, an' the man that pulls 'em down without puttin' 'em up agin, is a man that you'll find to be loose moraled in other matters."

"It's the truth as sure as you speak it, Mr. Doolittle," said a wiry, knocked-kneed farmer, with a hatchet-shaped face, who had sidled up to the group. "It warn't no longer than yesterday that I was sayin' the same words to the new minister, or rector as he tries to get us to call him, about false doctrine an' evil practice. 'The difference between sprinklin' and immersion ain't jest the difference between a few drops on the head an' goin' all under, Mr. Mullen,' I said, 'but 'tis the whole difference between the natur that's bent moral an' the natur that ain't.' It follows as clear an' logical as night follows day — now, I ax you, don't it, Mr. Doolittle — that a man that's gone wrong on immersion can't be trusted to keep his hands off the women?"

"I ain't sayin' all that, Solomon Hatch," responded old Adam, in a charitable tone, "seein' that I've never made up my own mind quite clear on those two p'ints — but I do say, be he immersed or sprinkled, that the man who took down them bars without puttin' 'em up ain't a man to be trusted."

"'Twarn't a man, 'twas a gal," put in young Adam, "I seed Molly Merryweather goin' toward the low grounds as I come up."

"Then it's most likely to have been she," commented Solomon, "for she is a light-minded one, as is proper an' becomin' in a child of sin."

The stranger looked up with a laugh from the moss-grown cattle trough beside which he was standing, and his eyes — of a peculiar dark blue — glanced merrily into the bleared ones of old Adam.

"I ain't so blind yet as not to know a Gay when I see one," said the labourer, with a sly chuckle. "If I hadn't closed the eyes of old Mr. Jonathan when he was found dead over yonder by Poplar Spring, I'd as soon as not take my Bible oath that he'd come young agin an' was ridin' along back to Jordan's Journey."

"Do you believe down here that my uncle killed himself?" asked the young man, with a furtive displeasure in his voice, as if he alluded to a disagreeable subject in response to some pressure of duty.

"'Tis as it may be, suh, I can't answer for that. To this day if you get Solomon Hatch or Betsey Bottom, (axin' her pardon for puttin' her last), started on the subject they'll contend till they're blue in the face that 'twas naught done but pure murder. However, I'm too old at my time of life to take up with any opinion that ain't pleasant to think on, an', when all's said an' done, pure murder ain't a peaceable, comfortable kind of thing to believe in when thar's only one Justice of the Peace an' he bed-ridden since Christmas. When you ax me to pin my faith on any p'int, be it for this world or the next, my first question consarnin' it is whether that particular p'int happens to be pleasant. 'Tis that little small argyment of mine that has confounded Mr. Mullen more than once, when he meets me on equal ground outside the pulpit. 'Mebbe 'tis an' mebbe 'tisn't,' as I remarked sociably to him about the matter of eternal damnation, 'but you can't deny, can you, suh, bein' outside the pulpit an' bound to speak the truth like the rest of us, that you sleep a long sight easier in yo' bed when you say to yo'self that mebbe 'tisn't?'"

"You see pa's old, an' he won't harbour any belief at his time of life that don't let him rest comfortable," remarked young Adam, in an apologetic aside. "It's that weakness of his that keeps him from bein' a thorough goin' good Christian."

"That strange young clergyman has stirred us all up about the doctrines," said Solomon Hatch. "He's opened Old Church agin, an' he works terrible hard to make us feel that we'd rather be sprinkled on the head than go under all over. A nice-mannered man he is, with a pretty face, an' some folks hold it to be a pity that we can't change our ideas about baptism and become Episcopals in our hearts, jest to oblige him. The women have, mostly, bein' an accommodatin' sex in the main, with the exception of Mrs. Mallory, the blacksmith's mother, who declars she'd rather give up eternal damnation any day than immersion."

"I ain't goin' so fur as that," rejoined old Adam, "an' mo'over, when it comes to the p'int, I've never found any oncommon comfort in either conviction in time of trouble. I go to Mr. Mullen's church regular every Sunday, seein' the Baptist one is ten miles off an' the road heavy, but in my opinion he's a bit too zealous to turn over the notions of the prophets an' set up his own. He's at the age when a man knows everything on earth an' generally knows it wrong."

"You see pa had been settin' on the anxious bench for forty years," explained young Adam, "an' when Mr. Mullen came, he took it away from under him, so to speak, while he was still settin' on it."

"'Twas my proper place," said old Adam resentfully, "when it comes to crops or the weather I am firm fixed enough in my belief, but in matters of religion I hold with the onsartain."

"Only his powerful belief in the Devil an' all his works keeps him from bein' a heathen," observed young Adam in awe-stricken pride. "Even Mr. Mullen can't move him, he's so terrible set."

"Well, he ain't my Redeemer, though doubtless he'd be cast down if he was to hear as I'd said so," chuckled the elder. "The over earnest, like the women folk, are better not handled at all or handled techily. I'm near blind as it is, but ain't that the man yonder leadin' his horse out of the Applegate road?"

"'Taint the rector, but the miller," responded his son. "He's bringin' over Mrs. Bottom's sack of meal on the back of his grey mare."

"Ah, he's one of the folks that's gone over neck an' crop to the Episcopals," said Solomon Hatch. "His folks have been Presbyterians over at Piping Tree sence the time of Noah, but he recites the Creed now as loud as he used to sing the doxology. I declar his voice boomed out so in my years last Sunday that I was obleeged to put up my hands to keep 'em from splittin'. Have you ever marked, Mr. Doolittle, havin' had the experience of ninety years, that when a man once takes up with a heresy, he shouts a heap louder than them that was born an' baptised in it? It seems as if they can't desert the ancient ways without defying 'em as well."

"'Tis so, 'tis so," admitted old Adam, wagging his head, "but Abel Revercomb was al'ays the sort that could measure nothin' less than a bushel. The pity with big-natured folk is that they plough up a mountain and trip at last over a pea-vine!"

From the gloom and brightness of the Applegate road there emerged the large figure of a young man, who led a handsome grey mare by the halter. As he moved against the coloured screen of the leaves something of the beauty of the desolate landscape showed in his face — the look of almost autumnal sadness that one finds, occasionally, in the eyes of the imaginative rustic. He wore a pair of sheepskin leggins into which the ends of his corduroy trousers were stuffed slightly below the knees. His head was bare, and from the open neck of his blue flannel shirt, faded from many washings, the muscles in his throat stood out like cords in the red-brown flesh. From his uncovered dark hair to his heavy boots, he was powdered with the white dust of his mill, the smell of which floated to the group under the mulberry tree as he passed up the walk to the tavern.

"I lay he seed Molly Merryweather comin' up from the low grounds," remarked Solomon, when the young man had moved out of earshot.

"Thar's truth spoken for once, if only by accident," retorted old Adam. "Yonder comes Reuben Merryweather's wagon now, laden with fodder. Is thar anybody settin' on it, young Adam? My eyes is too po' to make out."

"Molly Merryweather, who else?" responded the younger.

The wagon approached slowly, piled high with fodder and drawn by a pair of old oxen. In the centre of the load a girl was sitting, with a pink sunbonnet on her shoulders, and the light wind, which drove in gusts from the river, blowing the bunch of clustering brown curls on her neck. She was a small vivid creature, with a sunburned colour and changeable blue eyes that shone almost green in the sunlight.

"Terr'ble light minded as you can tell to look at her," said Solomon Hatch, "she's soft enough, so my wife says, where sick folks an' children an' animals are consarned, but she acts as if men war born without common feelin's of natur an' didn't come inside the Commandments. It's beyond me how a kind-hearted woman can be so onmerciful to an entire sex."

"Had it been otherwise 'twould have been downright disproof of God's providence and the bond of matrimony," responded old Adam.

"True, true, Mr. Doolittle," admitted Solomon, somewhat abashed. "Thar ain't any in these parts as can equal you on the Scriptures, as I've said over an' over agin. It's good luck for the Almighty that He has got you on His side, so to speak, to help Him confound His enemies."

"Thar're two sides to that, I reckon, seein' I confound not only His enemies, but His sarvents. Sech is the shot an' shell of my logic that the righteous fall before it as fast as the wicked — faster even I might say if I war speakin' particular. Have you marked how skeery Mr. Mullen has growed about meetin' my eyes over the rail of the pulpit? Why, 'twas only yesterday that I brought my guns to bear on the resurrection of the body, an' blowed it to atoms in his presence. 'Now thar's Reuben Merryweather who buried one leg at Manassas, Mr. Mullen,' I said as pleasant an' natchel as if I warn't about to confound him, 'an' what I'd like to have made clear an' easy to me, suh, is what use the Almighty is goin' to make of that odd leg on the Day of Jedgment? Will he add a new one onto Reuben,' I axed, 'when, as plain as logic will have it, it won't be a resurrection, but a creation, or will he start that leg a-trampin' by itself all the way from Manassas to jine the other at Old Church?' The parson had been holdin' pretty free all the mornin' with nobody daring to contradict him, and a man more taken aback by the power of logic my sight never lit on. 'Spare me, Mr. Doolittle,' was all he said, never a word mo'. 'Spare me, Mr. Doolittle.'"

"Ah, a tough customer you are," commented Solomon, "an' what answer did you make to that, suh?"

Old Adam's pipe returned to his mouth, and he puffed slowly a minute. "'Twas a cry for mercy, Solomon, so I spared him," he responded.

The wagon had reached the well, and without stopping, the large white-and-red oxen moved on into the turnpike. Bending from her high seat, Molly Merryweather smiled at the miller, who made a single stride toward her. Then her glance passed to the stranger, and for an instant she held his gaze with a pair of eyes that appeared to reflect his in shape, setting and colour. In the man's face there showed perplexity, admiration, ironic amusement; in the girl's there was a glimmer of the smile with which she had challenged the adoring look of the miller.

The flush left the features of young Revercomb, and he turned back, with a scowl on his forehead, while old Adam cackled softly over the stem of his pipe.

"Wiles come as natchel to women as wickedness to men, young Adam," he said. "The time to beware of 'em is in yo' youth befo' they've bewitched yo'. Why, 'tis only since I've turned ninety that I've trusted myself to think upon the sex with freedom."

"I'm bewarin'," replied his son, "but when Molly Merryweather widens her eyes and bites her underlip, it ain't in the natur of man or beast to stand out agin her. Why, if it had been anybody else but the rector I could have sworn I saw him squeezin' her hand when he let down the bars for her last Sunday."

"It's well knowed that when he goes to upbraid her for makin' eyes at him durin' the 'Have mercy on me,' he takes a mortal long time about the business," responded Solomon, "but, good Lord, 'tain't fur me to wish it different, seein' it only bears out all I've argured about false doctrines an' evil practice. From the sprinklin' of the head thar's but a single step downward to the holdin' of hands."

"Well, I'm a weak man like the rest of you," rejoined young Adam, "an' though I'm sound on the doctrines—in practice I sometimes backslide. I'm thankful, however, it's the lesser sin an' don't set so heavy on the stomach."

"Ah, it's the light women like Molly Merryweather that draws the eyes of the young," lamented old Adam.

"A pretty bit of vanity, is she?" inquired the stranger lightly, and fell back the next instant before the vigorous form of the miller, who swung round upon him with the smothered retort, "That's a lie!" The boyish face of the young countryman had paled under his sunburn and he spoke with the suppressed passion of a man who is not easily angered and who responds to the pressure of some absorbing emotion.

"Lord, Lord, Abel, Mr. Jonathan warn't meanin' no particular disrespect, nor mo' was I," quavered old Adam.

"You're too pipin' hot, miller," interposed Solomon. "They warn't meanin' any harm to you nor to the gal either. With half the county courtin' her it ain't to be expected that she'd go as sober as a grey mare, is it?"

"Well, they're wastin' their time," retorted the miller, "for she marries me, thank God, this coming April."

Turning away the next instant, he vaulted astride the bare back of the mare, and started at a gallop in the direction of the turnpike.

"I'll be blessed if that little gal of Reuben Merryweather's ain't his religion," commented young Adam.

"An' he's of the opinion that he's going to marry her this comin' spring," cackled Solomon. "Well, I could be namin' two or three others of the same mind, if I'd take the trouble. It's all sensible enough to lambaste the women when they don't pick up every virtue that we throw away, but what's to be expected of 'em, I ax, when all the men sence Adam have been praisin' the sober kind of gal while they war runnin' arter the silly? Thar're some among 'em, I reckon, as have reasoned out to themselves that a man's pursuit speaks louder in the years, arter all, than his praise. Now, thar's a fine, promisin' farmer, like the miller gone runnin' loose, mo's the pity."

"A kind heart at bottom," said old Adam, "but he's got a deal of larnin' to do befo' he'll rest content to bide along quietly in the same world with human natur."

"Oh, he's like the Revercombs from the beginnin'," protested Solomon, "slow an' peaceable an' silent until you rouse 'em, but when they're once roused, they're roused beyond God or devil."

"Is this young Cain or Abel the head of the family?" inquired the stranger.

"Bless you, no, Mr. Jonathan, he ain't the head — for thar's his brother Abner still livin' — but, head or tail, he's the only part that counts, when it comes to that. Until the boy grew up an' took hold of things, the Revercombs warn't nothin' mo' than slack fisted, out-at-heel po' white trash, as the niggers say, though the old man, Abel's grandfather, al'ays lays claim to bein' connected with the real Revercombs, higher up in the State — However that may be, befo' the war thar warn't no place for sech as them, an' 'tis only since times have changed an' the bottom begun to press up to the top that anybody has heerd of 'em. Abel went to school somehow by hook or crook an' got a good bit of book larnin', they say, an' then he came back here an' went to turnin' up every stone an' stick on the place. He ploughed an' he sowed an' he reaped till he'd saved up enough to buy that piece of low ground betwixt his house and the grist-mill. Then Ebenezer Timberlake died of the dropsy an' the first thing folks knew, Abel had moved over and turned miller. All the grain that's raised about here now goes to his mill, an' they say he'll be throwin' out the old and puttin' in new-fangled machinery befo' the year is up. He's the foremost man in these parts, suh, unless you war to come to Jordan's Journey to live like yo' uncle."

"To live like my uncle," repeated the young man, with an ironic intonation that escaped the ears of old Adam. "But what of the miller's little sweetheart with the short hair and the divine smile? Whose daughter is she?"

Old Adam's thin lips flattened until a single loosened tooth midway of his lower gum wagged impishly back and forth. His face, sunburned and frosted like the hardened rind of some winter fruit, revealed the prominent bones of the skull under the sunken flesh. One of his gnarled old hands, trembling and red, clutched the clay bowl of his pipe; the other, with the callous skin of the palm showing under the bent fingers, rested half open on the leather patch that covered the knee of his overalls. A picture of toilworn age, of the inevitable end of all mortal labour, he had sat for hours in the faint sunshine, smiling with his sunken, babyish mouth at the brood of white turkeys that crowded about the well.

"Well, she's Reuben Merryweather's granddaughter, suh," replied Solomon in the place of the elder. "He was overseer at Jordan's Journey, you know, durin' the old gentleman's lifetime, after the last Jordan died and the place was bought by yo' uncle. Ah, 'twas different, suh, when the Jordans war livin'!"

Some furtive malice in his tone caused the stranger to turn sharply upon him.

"The girl's mother — who was she?" he asked.

"Janet Merryweather, the prettiest gal that ever set foot on these roads. Ah, 'twas a sad story, was hers, an' the less said about it, the soonest forgotten. Thar was some folks, the miller among 'em, that dropped dead out with the old minister — that was befo' Mr. Mullen's time — for not wantin' her to be laid in the churchyard. A hard case, doubtless, but a pious man such as I likes to feel sartain that however much he may have fooled along with sinful women in this world, only the most respectable of thar sex will rise around him at the Jedgment."

"And the father?" inquired the stranger, with a sound as if he drew in his breath sharply.

"Accordin' to the Law an' the Prophets she hadn't any. That may be goin' agin natur, suh, but 'tis stickin' close to Holy Writ an' the wisdom of God."

To this the young man's only response was a sudden angry aversion that showed in his face. Then lifting his horse's head from the trodden grass by the well, he sprang into the saddle, and started, as the miller had done, over the three roads into the turnpike. Remembering as he passed the gate posts that he had spoken no parting word to the group under the mulberry tree, he raised himself in his stirrups, and called back "Good day to you. Many thanks," in his pleasant voice.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH DESTINY WEARS THE COMIC MASK

PUTTING his horse to a canter, Mr. Jonathan Gay rode through the old gate into the turnpike. His still indignant look was fixed on the heavy wheel-ruts ahead, while his handsome though fleshy figure inclined slightly forward in the saddle after a foreign fashion. Seen close at hand his face, which was impressive at a distance, lost a certain distinction of contour, as though the marks of experience had blurred, rather than accentuated, the original type. The bones of forehead and nose still showed classic in outline, but in moulding the mouth and chin nature had not adhered closely to the aristocratic structure beneath. The flesh sagged a little in places; the brow was a trifle too heavy, the jaw a trifle too prominent, the lips under the short dark moustache were a trifle too full. Yet in spite of this coarseness of finish, his face was well coloured, attractive, and full of generous, if whimsical, humour. A judge of men would have seen in it proof that Mr. Gay's character consisted less in a body of organized tendencies than in a procession of impulses.

White with dust the turnpike crawled straight ahead between blood-red clumps of sumach and bramble on which the faint sunlight still shone. At intervals, where the dripping from over-hanging boughs had worn the road into dangerous hollows, boles of young saplings had been placed cross-wise in a corduroy pattern, and above them clouds of small belated butterflies drifted in the wind like blown yellow rose leaves. On the right the thin corn shocks looked as if they were sculptured in bronze, and amid them there appeared presently the bent figure of a harvester, outlined in dull blue against a sky of burnt orange. From the low grounds beside the river a mist floated up, clinging in fleecy shreds to the short grass that grew in and out of the bare stubble. The aspect of melancholy, which was depressing even in the broad glare of noon, became almost intolerable under the waning light of the afterglow. Miles of loneliness stretched on either side of the turnpike, which trailed, without fork or bend, into the flat distance beyond the great pine at the bars.

For the twentieth time since he had left the tavern, Mr. Gay, whose habit it was to appear whimsical when he felt despondent, declared to himself that he'd be damned if the game was worth half what the candle was likely to cost him. Having arrived, without notable misadventure, at the age of thirty, he had already reduced experience to a series of episodes and had embraced the casual less as a pastime than as a philosophy.

"If the worst comes to the worst — hang it! — I suppose I may hunt a Molly Cotton-tail," he grumbled, bringing his horse's gait down to an amble. "There ought to be good hounds about, judging from the hang-dog look of the natives. Why in thunder did the old boy want to bury himself and his heirs forever in this god-forsaken land's end, and what in the deuce have mother and Aunt Kesiah done with themselves down here for the last twenty years? Two thousand acres? Damn it! I'd rather have six feet on good English soil! Came to get rid of one woman, did he? — and tumbled into a pretty puddle with another as soon as he got here. By George, it's in the bone and it is obliged to come out in the blood. A Gay will go on ogling the sex, I suppose, as long as he is able to totter back from the edge of the grave."

As he approached the blazed pine, a spot of darkness, which he had at first mistaken for a small tree, detached itself from the surrounding shadows, and assumed gradually a human shape. His immediate impression was that the shape was a woman and that she was young. With his next breath he became aware that she was also beautiful. In the fading light her silhouette stood out as distinctly against the mellow background of sky, as did the great pine which marked the almost obliterated path over the fields. Her dress was the ordinary calico one, of some dull purplish shade, worn by the wives and daughters of the neighbouring farmers; and on her bare white arm, with its upturned sleeve, she carried a small split basket half filled with persimmons. She was of an almost pure Saxon type — tall, broad-shouldered, deep-bosomed, with a skin the colour of new milk, and soft ashen hair parted smoothly over her ears and coiled in a large, loose knot at the back of her head. As he reached her she smiled faintly and a little brown mole at the corner of her mouth played charmingly up and down. After the first minute, Gay found himself fascinated by this single imperfection in her otherwise flawless features. More than her beauty he felt that it stirred his blood and aroused in him the physical tenderness which he associated always with some vague chivalrous impulse.

She moved slightly when he dismounted beside her, and a number of small splotches of black circling around her resolved themselves into a bodyguard of little negroes, clad in checked pinafores, with their scant locks wrapped tightly with crimson cotton.

"May I let down the bars for you?" he asked, turning to look into her face with a smile, "and do you take your collection of piccaninnies along for protection or for amusement?"

"Grandma doesn't like me to go out alone, sir — so many dreadful things happen," she answered gently, with an utter absence of humour. "I can't take anybody who is at work, so I let the little darkies come. Mary Jo is the oldest, and she's only six."

"Is your home near here?"

"I live at the mill. It's a mile farther on, but there is a short cut."

"Then you are related to the miller, Mr. Revercomb — that fine looking chap I met at the ordinary?"

"He is my uncle. I am Blossom Revercomb," she answered.

"Blossom? It's a pretty name."

Her gaze dwelt on him calmly for an instant, with the faintest quiver of her full white lids, which appeared to weigh heavily on her rather prominent eyes of a pale periwinkle blue.

"My real name is Keren-happuch," she said at last, after a struggle with herself, "grandma bein' a great Scripture reader, chose it when I was born — but they call me Blossom, for short."

"And am I permitted, Miss Keren-happuch, to call you Blossom?"

Again she hesitated, pondering gravely.

"Mary Jo, if you unwrap your hair your mother will whip you," she said suddenly, and went on without a perceptible change of tone, "Keren-happuch is an ugly name, and I don't like it — though grandma says we oughtn't to think any of the Bible names ugly, not even Gog. She is quite an authority on Scripture, is grandma, and she can repeat the first chapter in Chronicles backward, which the minister couldn't do when he tried."

"I'd like to hear the name that would sound ugly on your lips, Miss Keren-happuch."

If the sons of farmers had sought to enchant her ears with similar strains, there was no hint of it in the smiling eyes she lifted to his. The serenity of her look added, he thought, to her resemblance to some pagan goddess — not to Artemis nor to Aphrodite, but to some creature compounded equally of earth and sky. Io perhaps, or Europa? By Jove he had it at last — the Europa of Veronese!

"There'll have to be a big frost before the persimmons get sweet," she observed in a voice that was remarkably deep and full for a woman. With the faint light on her classic head and her milky skin, he found a delicious piquancy in the remark. Had she gossiped, had she even laughed, the effect would have been disastrous. Europa, he was vaguely aware, would hardly have condescended to coquetry. Her speech, like her glance, would be brief, simple, direct.

"Tell me about the people here," he asked after a pause, in which he plucked idly at the red-topped orchard grass through which they were passing. Behind them the six little negroes walked primly in single file, Mary Jo in the lead and a chocolate-coloured atom of two toddling at the tail of the procession. From time to time shrill squeaks went up from the rear when a startled partridge whirred over the pasture or a bare brown foot came down on a toad or a grasshopper.

As she made no reply, he added in a more intimate tone, "I am Jonathan Gay, of Jordan's Journey, as I suppose you know."

"The old gentleman's nephew?" she said, while she drew slightly away from him. "Mary Jo, did you tell Tobias's mammy that he was coming along?"

"Nawm, I ain done tole nobody caze dar ain nobody done ax me."

"But I said that you were not to bring him without letting Mahaly know. You remember what a whipping she gave him the last time he came!"

At this a dismal howl burst from Tobias. "I ain't-a-gwine-ter-git-a-whuppin'!"

"Lawd, Miss Blossom, hit cyarn' hut Tobias ez hit ud hut de res' er us," replied Mary Jo, with fine philosophy, "case dar ain but two years er 'im ter whup."

"I ain't-a-gwine-ter-git-a-whuppin'!" sang Tobias in a passionate refrain.

"Now that's just it," said Gay, feeling as though he should like to throttle the procession of piccaninnies. "What I can't understand is why the people about here — those I met at Bottom's Ordinary, for instance, seem to have disliked me even before I came."

Without surprise or embarrassment, she changed the basket from her right to her left arm, and this simple movement had the effect of placing him at a distance, though apparently by accident.

"That's because of the old gentleman, I reckon," she answered, "my folks all hated him, I don't know why."

"But can you guess? You see I really want to understand. I've been away since I was eight years old and I have only the haziest memories."

The question brought them into a sudden intimacy, as if his impulsive appeal to her had established a relation which had not existed the minute before. He liked the look of her strong shoulders, of her deep bosom rising in creamy white to her throat; and the hint of feminine weakness in her mouth, the quiver of her red lower lip when she talked, aroused in him a swift and facile emotion. The melancholy of the landscape, reacting on the dangerous softness of his mood, bent his nature toward her like a flame driven by wind. Around them the red-topped orchard grass faded to pale rose in the twilight, and beyond the crumbling rail fence miles of feathery broomsedge swept to the pines that stood straight and black against the western horizon. Impressions of the hour and the scene, of colour and sound, were blended in the allurement which Nature proffered him, for her own ends, through the woman beside him. Not Blossom Revercomb, but the great Mother beguiled him. The forces that moved in the wind, in the waving broomsedge, and in the call of the whip-poor-will, stirred in his pulses as they stirred in the objects around him. That fugitive attraction of the body, which Nature has shielded at the cost of finer attributes, leaped upon him like a presence that had waited in earth and sky. Loftier aspirations vanished before it. Not his philosophy but the accident of a woman's face worked for destiny.

"I never knew just how it was," she answered slowly as if weighing her words, "but your uncle wasn't one of our folks, you know. He bought the place the year before the war broke out, and there was always some mystery about him and about the life he led — never speaking to anybody if he could help it, always keeping himself shut up when he could. He hadn't a good name in these parts, and the house hasn't a good name either, for the darkies say it is ha'nted and that old Mrs. Jordan — 'ole Miss' they call her — still comes back out of her grave to rebuke the ha'nt of Mr. Jonathan. There is a path leading from the back porch to the poplar spring where none of them will go for water after nightfall. Uncle Abednego swears that he met his old master there one night when he went down to fill a bucket and that a woman was with him. It all comes, I reckon, of Mr. Jonathan having been found dead at the spring, and you know how the darkies catch onto any silly fancy about the dead walking. I don't believe much in ha'nts myself, though great-grandma has seen many a one in her day, and all the servants at Jordan's Journey declare that the ghost of old Mr. Jonathan will never rest quiet. I've always wondered if your mother and Miss Kesiah were ever frightened by the stories the darkies tell?" For a moment she paused, and then added softly, "It was all so different, they say, when the Jordans were living."

Again the phrase which had begun to irritate him! Who were these dead and gone Jordans whose beneficent memory still inhabited the house they had built?

"I don't think my mother would care for such stories," he replied after a minute. "She has never mentioned them in her letters."

"Of course nobody really puts faith in them, but I never pass the spring, if I can help it, after the sun has gone down. It makes me feel so dreadfully creepy."

"The root of this gossip, I suppose, lies in the general dislike of my uncle?"

"Perhaps — I'm not sure," she responded, and he felt that her rustic simplicity possessed a charm above the amenities of culture. "The old clergyman — that was before Mr. Mullen's day — when we all went to the church over at Piping Tree — used to say that the mercy of God would have to exceed his if He was ever going to redeem him. I remember hearing him tell grandma when I was a child that there were a few particulars in which he couldn't answer with certainty for God, and that old Mr. Jonathan Gay was one of 'em. 'God Almighty will have to find His own way in this matter,' he used to declare, 'for I wash my hands of it.' I'm sorry, sir," she finished contritely, "I forgot he was your own blood relation."

In the spirit of this contrition, she changed the basket back again to her left arm; and perceiving his advantage, Gay acted upon it with his accustomed alacrity.

"Don't apologize, please, I am glad I have this from your lips — not from a stranger's."

Under the spell of her beauty, he was aware of a pleasurable sensation, as though the pale rose of the orchard grass had gone to his head and coloured his vision. There was a thrill in feeling her large, soft arm brushing his sleeve, in watching the rise and fall of her bosom under her tight calico dress.

"I shall always know that we were friends — good friends, from the first," he resumed after a minute.

"You are very kind, sir," she answered, "this is my path over the stile and it is growin' late — Tobias's mother will surely give him a whippin'. I hope you don't mind my havin' gathered these persimmons on your land," she concluded, with an honesty which was relieved from crudeness by her physical dignity, "they are hardly fit to eat because there has been so little frost yet."

"Well, I'm sorry for that, Miss Keren-happuch, or shall it be Blossom?"

"I like Blossom better," she answered shyly, lifting her scant calico skirt with one hand as she mounted the stile.

"Then good night, lovely Blossom," he called gaily while he turned back into the bridle path which led like a frayed white seam over the pasture.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH MR. GAY ARRIVES AT HIS JOURNEY'S END

Broad and low, with the gabled pediment of the porch showing through boughs of oaks, and a flight of bats wheeling over the ivied roof, the house appeared to Gay beyond a slight swell in the meadows. The grove of oaks, changing from dark red to russet, was divided by a short walk, bordered by clipped box, which led to the stone steps and to two discoloured marble urns on which broken-nosed Cupids were sporting. As he was about to slip his reins over the back of an iron chair on the lawn, a shriek in a high pitched negro voice pierced his ears from a half shuttered dormer-window in the east wing.

"Fo' de Lawd, hit's de ha'nt er ole marster! Yessuh — Yessuh, — I'se a-comin' — I'se a-comin'."

The next instant the window slammed with a bang, and the sound of flying footsteps echoed through the darkened interior of the house.

"Open the door, you fool! I'm not a ghost!" shouted Gay, but the only response came in an hysterical babble of moans from the negro quarters somewhere in the rear and in the soft whir in his face of a leatherwing bat as it wheeled low in the twilight. There was no smoke in the chimneys, and the square old house, with its hooded roof and its vacant windows, assumed a sinister and inhospitable look against the background of oaks. His mother and his aunt, he concluded, were doubtless away for their winter's shopping, so lifting his horse's head from the grass, he passed between the marble urns and the clipped box, and followed a path, deep in leaves, which led from the west wing of the house to the outside kitchen beyond a paved square at the back. Half intelligible words floated to him as he approached, and from an old pear-tree near the door there was a flutter of wings where a brood of white turkeys settled to roost. Beyond the bole of the tree a small negro in short skirts was "shooin'" a large rooster into the henhouse, but at the muffled fall of Gay's horse's hoofs on the dead leaves, she turned with a choking sound, and fled to the shelter of the kitchen at her back.

"My time's done come, but I ain't-a-gwine! I ain't-a-gwine!" wailed the chorus within. "Ole marster's done come ter fotch me, but I ain't-a-gwine! O Lawd, I ain't-a-gwine! O Jesus, I ain't-a-gwine!"

"You fools, hold your tongues!" stormed the young man, losing his temper. "Send somebody out here to take my horse or I'll give you something to shout over in earnest."

The shrieks trembled high for an instant, and then died out in a despairing moan, while the blanched face of an old servant appeared in the doorway.

"Is hit you er yo' ha'nt, Marse Jonathan?" he inquired humbly.

"Come here, you doddering idiot, and take my horse."

But half reassured the negro came a step or two forward, and made a feeble clutch at the reins, which dropped from his grasp when the roosting turkeys stirred uneasily on the bough above.

"I'se de butler, marster, en I ain never sot foot in de stable sence de days er ole miss."

"Where's my mother?"

"Miss Angela, she's done gone up ter town en Miss Kesiah she's done gone erlong wid 'er."

"Is the house closed?"

"Naw, suh, hit ain closed, but Miss Molly she's got de keys up yonder at de house er de overseer."

"Well, send somebody with a grain of sense out here, and I'll look up Miss Molly."

At this the butler vanished promptly into the kitchen, and a minute later a half-grown mulatto boy relieved Gay of his horse, while he pointed to a path through an old apple orchard that led to the cottage of the overseer. As the young man passed under the gnarled boughs to a short flagged walk before the small, whitewashed house in which "Miss Molly" lived, he wondered idly if the lady who kept the keys would prove to be the amazing little person he had seen some hours earlier perched on the load of fodder in the ox-cart. The question was settled almost before it was asked, for a band of lamplight streamed suddenly from the door of the cottage, and in the centre of it appeared the figure of a girl in a white dress, with red stockings showing under her short skirts, and a red ribbon filleting the thick brown curls on her forehead. From her movements he judged that she was mixing a bowl of soft food for the old hound at her feet, and he waited until she had called the dog inside for his supper, before he went forward and spoke her name in his pleasant voice.

At the sound she turned with a start, and he saw her vivid little face, with the wonderful eyes, go white for a minute.

"So you are Mr. Jonathan? I thought so," she said at last, "but grandfather told me you had sent no word of your coming."

She spoke quickly, with a refinement of accent which puzzled him until he remembered the malicious hints Solomon Hatch had let fall at the tavern. That she was, in reality, of his blood and the child of his uncle, he had not doubted since the moment she had smiled at him from her seat on the oxcart. How much was known, he now wondered. Had his uncle provided for her? Was his mother — was his Aunt Kesiah — aware of the truth?

"She missed my letter, I suppose," he replied. "Has she been long away?"

"Only a week. She is expected home day after to-morrow."

"Then I shall beg you to open the house for me."

She had turned back to the old hound, and was bending over to place his bowl of bread and milk on the hearth. A log fire, in which a few pine branches stood out illuminated like boughs of flame, filled the big stone fireplace, which was crudely whitewashed to resemble the low walls of the room. A kettle hung on an iron crane before the blaze, and the singing of the water made a cheerful noise amid a silence which struck Gay suddenly as hostile. When the girl raised her head he saw that her face had grown hard and cold, and that the expression of her eyes had changed to one of indignant surprise. The charming coquetry had fled from her look, yet her evident aversion piqued him into a half smiling, half serious interest. He wondered if she would marry that fine looking rustic, the miller, and if the riotous Gay blood in her veins would flow placidly in her mother's class? Had she, too, inherited, if not the name, yet the weaknesses of an older race? Was she, like himself, cursed with swift fancies and swifter disillusionments? How frail she was, and how brilliant! How innocent and how bitter!

He turned away, ostensibly to examine a print on the wall, and while his back was toward her, he felt that her gaze stabbed him like the thrust of a knife. Wheeling quickly about, he met her look, but to his amazement, she continued to stare back at him with the expression of indignant surprise still in her face. How she hated him and, by Jove, how she *could* hate! She reminded him of a little wild brown animal as she stood there with her teeth showing between her parted red lips and her eyes flashing defiance. The next minute he found himself asking if she could ever grow gentle — could ever soften enough to allow herself to be stroked? He remembered Solomon Hatch's remark that "she was onmerciful to an entire sex," and in spite of his effort at composure, a laugh sprang to his lips.

In the centre of the room a table was laid, and going over to it, she busied herself with the cups and saucers as though she were anxious to put a disagreeable presence out of her thoughts.

"May I share your supper?" he asked, and waited, not without amusement, for her answer.

"I'm sorry there isn't any for you at the big house," she answered politely. "If you will sit down, I'll tell Delily to bring in some batterbread."

"And you?"

"I'll have mine with grandfather. He's out in the barn giving medicine to the red cow."

While she spoke Delily entered with a plate of cornbread and a pot of coffee, and a minute later Reuben Merryweather paused on the threshold to shake off a sprinkling of bran from his hair and beard. He was a bent, mild looking old man, with a wooden leg which made a stumping noise when he walked, and a pair of wistful brown eyes, like those of an aged hound that has been worn out by hard service. Past seventy now, his youth had been trained to a different civilization, and there was a touching gentleness in his face, as if he expressed still the mental attitude of a class which had existed merely as a support or a foil to the order above it. Without spirit to resent, he, with his fellows, had endured the greatest evils of slavery. With the curse of free labour on the land, there had been no incentive for toil, no hire for the labourer. Like an incubus the system had lain over them, stifling all energy, checking all progress, retarding all prosperity save the prosperity of the great land-owners. Then the soil had changed hands, and where the plough had broken the earth, the seeds of a democracy had germinated and put forth from the very blood of the battlefields. In the upward pressure of class, he had seen the stability of custom yield at last to the impetus of an energy that was not racial but individual. Yet from the transition he had remained always a little apart. Reverence had become for him a habit of mind, and he had learned that respect could outlive even a belief in the thing upon which it was founded. Mr. Jonathan and he had been soldiers together. His old commander still entered his thoughts to the rattle of musketry and the roar of cannon, and a single sublime action at Malvern Hill had served in the mind of the soldier to spread a legendary glamour over a life which held hardly another incident that was worthy of remembrance.

At his entrance Molly melted from her hostile attitude, and while she hung on the old man's breast, Gay noticed, with surprise, that she was made up of enchanting curves and delicious softness. Her sharpened features grew rounder, and her thin red lips lost their hardness of outline. When she raised her head after a minute, he saw that the light in her eyes adorned and enriched her. By Jove, he had never imagined that she could change and colour like that!

"You are late, grandfather," said the girl, "I was coming to look for you with a lantern."

"The red cow kept me," answered the old man, adding as he held out his hand to Gay, "So you've come at last, Mr. Jonathan. Your mother will be pleased."

"I was sorry to find her absent," replied Gay, "and I was just asking your granddaughter if she would permit me to join you at supper?"

"To be sure — to be sure," responded Reuben, with a cheerfulness which struck Gay as singularly pathetic. "After supper Molly will go over with Patsey and see that you are made comfortable."

The old hound, blind and toothless, fawned at his knees, and leaning over, he caressed it with a knotted and trembling hand.

"Has Spot had his supper, Molly?"

"Yes, grandfather. He can eat only soft bread and gravy." At her voice the hound groped toward her, and stooping, she laid her soft, flushed cheek on his head.

"Well, sit down, suh, sit down," said Reuben, speaking timidly as if he were not sure he had chosen the right word. "If you'll tell Delily, honey, Mr. Jonathan will have his supper."

"On condition that you let me share yours, Mr. Merryweather," insisted Gay, in his genial tone. "If you're going to make company of me, I shall go hungry until to-morrow."

From a wooden safe in the corner Molly brought a plate and a cup, and made a place for the young man at the end of the red-and-white cloth on the table. Then she turned away, without speaking, and sat down behind the tin coffeepot, which emitted a fragrant steam.

"Cream and sugar?" she inquired presently, meeting his eyes over the glass lamp which stood midway between them.

Gay had been talking to Reuben about the roads — "jolly bad roads," he called them, "wasn't it possible to make them decent for riding?" Looking up at the girl's question, he answered absently, "two lumps. Cream? Yes, please, a little," and then continued to stare at her with a vague and impersonal wonder. She was half savage, of course, with red hands, and bad manners and dressed like a boy that had got into skirts for a joke — but, by George, there was something about her that bit into the fancy. Not a beauty like his Europa of the pasture (who was, when it came to that?) — but a fascinating little beggar, with a quality of sudden surprises that he could describe by no word except "iridescent." He liked the high arch of her brows; but her nose wasn't good and her lips were too thin except when she smiled. When she smiled! It was her smile, after all, that made her seem a thing of softness and bloom born to be kissed.

Reuben ate his food rapidly, pouring his coffee into the saucer, and drinking it in loud gulps that began presently to make Gay feel decidedly nervous. Once the young man inadvertently glanced toward him, and turning away the instant afterwards, he found the girl's eyes watching him with a defiant and threatening look. Her passionate defence of Reuben reminded Gay of a nesting bird under the eye of the hunter. She did not plead, she dared — actually dared him to criticise the old man even in his thoughts!

That Molly herself was half educated and possessed some smattering of culture, it was easy to see. She was less rustic in her speech than his Europa, and there was the look of breeding, or of blood, in the fine poise of her head, in her small shapely hands, which he remembered were a distinguishing mark of the Gays.

"Mr. Mullen came for you in his cart," said Reuben, glancing from one to the other of his hearers with his gentle and humble look. "I told him you must have forgotten as you'd ridden down to the low grounds."

"No, I didn't forget," replied Molly, indifferent apparently to the restraint of Gay's presence, "I did it on purpose." Meeting the young man's amused and enquiring expression, she added defiantly, "There are plenty of girls that are always ready to go with him and it's because I'm not that he wants me."

"He's not the only one, to judge from what I heard at the ordinary."

She shrugged her shoulders — an odd gesture for a rustic coquette — while a frown overshadowed her features.

"They're all alike," she retorted scornfully. "If you go over to the mill you'll probably find Abel Revercomb sulking and brow-beating his mother because I smiled at you this afternoon. And I did it only to plague him!"

"Molly's a good girl," said Reuben, rather as if he expected the assertion to be disputed, "but she was taught to despise folks when she was a baby— wasn't you, pretty?"

"Not you — never you, grandfather."

The intimate nature of the conversation grated upon Gay not a little. There was something splendidly barbaric about the girl, and yet the mixture of her childishness and her cynicism affected him unpleasantly rather than otherwise. His ideal woman — the woman of the early Victorian period — was submissive and clinging. He was perfectly assured that she would have borne her wrongs, and even her mother's wrongs, with humility. Meekness had always seemed to him the becoming mental and facial expression for the sex; and that a woman should resent appeared almost as indelicate as that she should propose.

When supper was over, and Reuben had settled to his pipe, with the old hound at his feet, Molly took down a bunch of keys from a nail in the wall, and lit a lantern with a taper which she selected from a china vase on the mantelpiece. Once outside she walked a little ahead of Gay and the yellow blaze of the lantern flitted like a luminous bird over the flagged walk bordered by gooseberry bushes. Between the stones, which were hollowed by the tread of generations, nature had embroidered the bare places with delicate patterns of moss.

At the kitchen the girl stopped to summon Patsey, the maid, who was discovered roasting an apple at the end of a long string before the logs.

"I am going to the big house. Come and make up the bed in the blue room," Gay heard through the door.

"Yes'm, Miss Molly, I'se a-comin' in jes a minute."

"And bring plenty of lightwood. He will probably want a fire."

With this she appeared again on the outside, crossed the paved square to the house, and selecting a large key, unlocked the door, which grated on its hinges as Gay pushed it open. Following her into the hall, he stood back while she lit a row of tallow candles, in old silver sconces, which extended up the broad mahogany staircase to the upper landing. One by one as she applied the taper, the candles flashed out in a misty circle, and then rising in a clear flame, shone on her upraised hand and on the brilliant red of her lips and cheeks.

"That is your mother's room," she said, pointing to a closed door, "and this is yours. Patsey will make a fire."

"It's rather gloomy, isn't it?"

"Shall I bring you wine? I have the key to the cellar."

"Brandy, if you please. The place feels as if it had been shut up for a century."

"It was your uncle's room. Do you mind sleeping here? It's the easiest to get ready."

"Not with a fire — and I may have a lamp, I suppose?"

At his question Patsey appeared with an armful of resinous pine, and a few minutes later, a cheerful blaze was chasing the shadows up the great brick chimney. When Molly returned with the brandy, Gay was leaning against the mantelpiece idly burning a bunch of dried cat-tails he had taken from a blue-and-white china vase.

"It's a gloomy old business, isn't it?" he observed, glancing from the high canopied bed with its hangings of faded damask to an engraving of the Marriage of Pocahontas between the dormer-windows. "If there are ghosts about, I suppose I'd better prepare to face them."

"Only in the west wing, the darkies say, but I think they are bats. As for those in the haunt's walk, I never believed in them. Patsey is bringing your lamp, and here is the brandy. Can I do anything else for you?"

"Only tell me," he burst out, "why in thunder the whole county hates me?"

She laughed shortly. "I can't tell you — wait and find out."

Her audacity half angered, half paralyzed him. "What a vixen you are!" he observed presently with grudging respect.

The crimson flooded her face, and he watched her teeth gleam dangerously, as if she were bracing herself for a retort. The impulse to torment her was strong in him, and he yielded to it much as a boy might have teased a small captive animal of the woods.

"With such a temper you ought to have been an ugly woman," he said, "but you're so pretty I'm strongly inclined to kiss you."

"If you do, I'll strike you," she gasped.

The virgin in her showed fierce and passionate, not shy and fleeting. That she was by instinct savagely pure, he could tell by the look of her.

"I believe it so perfectly that I've no intention of trying," he rejoined.

"I'm not half so pretty as my mother was," she said after a pause.

Her loyalty to the unfortunate Janet touched him to sympathy. "Don't quarrel with me, Molly," he pleaded, "for I mean to be friends with you."

As he uttered the words, he was conscious of a pleasant feeling of self-approbation while his nature vibrated to the lofty impulse. This sensation was so gratifying while it lasted that his manner assumed a certain austerity as of one who had determined to be virtuous at any cost. Morally he was on stilts for the moment, and the sense of elevation was as novel as it was insecure.

"I know you are a good girl, Molly," he observed staidly, "that is why I am so anxious to be your friend."

"Is there nothing more that I can do for you?" she inquired, with frigid reserve, as she took up the lantern.

"Yes, one thing — you can shake hands."

The expression of indignant surprise appeared again in her face, and she fell back a step, shaking her head stubbornly as she did so.

"I'd rather not — if you don't mind," she answered.

"But if I do mind — and I do."

"Still I'd rather not."

"Do you really dislike me so much? What have I done to deserve it?"

"I don't like men even when I pretend to."

"Do you dislike me as much as you dislike the miller?"

"More."

"Or the rector?"

"Oh, far more. You are a Gay."

"Yes, I am a Gay," he might have retorted, "and you, my pretty savage, are very much a Gay, also."

Swinging the lantern in her hand, she moved to the door, as if she were anxious to put an end to a conversation which had become suddenly too intimate. On the threshold she looked back, and remarked in a precise, authoritative voice:

"There are blankets in the bottom drawer if you find you haven't covering enough."

"I shall remember — there are blankets in the bottom drawer."

"Patsey will bring hot water at eight and Uncle Abednego will give you breakfast in the dining-room."

"Then I'm not to have it with you?"

"With me? Oh, I live with grandfather. I never come to the big house except when Mrs. Gay is in town."

"Do you see nothing, then, of my mother when she is at home?"

"Sometimes I help her to make raspberry vinegar or preserves. If you hear a noise in the night it is only the acorns dropping on the roof. There are so many oaks. Good night, Mr. Jonathan."

"Good night," he returned, "I wish you'd shake hands," — but she had vanished.

The room was cosy and warm now — and flinging himself into a chair with deep arms that stood on the hearth, he lit his cigar and sipped drowsily the glass of brandy she had left on a silver tray on the table. The ceiling was ridiculously high — what a waste of good bricks and mortar! — the room was ridiculously large! On the smooth white walls reddish shadows moved in a fantastic procession, and from the big chintz-covered lounge the monstrous blue poppies leaped out into the firelight. The high canopy over the bed was draped with prim folds of damask, and the coverlet was of some quaint crocheted work that hung in fringed ends to the floor. Here again from the threadbare velvet carpet the blue poppies stared back at him.

An acorn dropped on the roof, and in spite of Molly's warning, he started and glanced toward the window, where a frosted pattern of ivy showed like a delicate lacework on the small greenish panes. Another dropped; then another. Gradually he began to listen for the sound and to miss it when there came a long silence. One might easily imagine it to be the tapping of ghostly fingers — of the fingers of pretty Janet Merryweather — some quarter of a century earlier. Her daughter was hardly more than twenty now, he supposed, and he wondered how long the mad idyllic period had lasted before her birth? Turning to the books on the table, he opened one and a yellowed fragment of paper fluttered to the floor at his feet. When he stooped after it, he saw that there was a single word on it traced faintly in his uncle's hand: "To-morrow."

And then, being a person whose imagination dealt only with the obvious, he undressed, blew out the light, and fell peacefully asleep to the dropping of acorns.

CHAPTER IV

THE REVERCOMBS

ON THE morning after the meeting at Bottom's Ordinary, Abel Revercomb came out on the porch of the little house in which he lived, and looked across the steep rocky road to the mill-race which ran above a silver stream known as Sycamore Creek. The grist-mill, a primitive log building, worked after ancient methods, had stood for a hundred years or more beside a crooked sycamore tree, which grew midway of the stream and shaded the wheel and the shingled roof from the blue sky above. The old wooden race, on which the young green mosses shone like a coating of fresh paint on a faded surface, ran for a short distance over the brook, where the broad yellow leaves drifted down to the deep pond below. Across the slippery poplar log, which divided the mill from the road and the house occupied by the miller, there was a stretch of good corn land, where the corn stood in shocks after the harvest, and beyond this the feathery bloom of the broomsedge ran on to the luminous band of marshes on the far horizon.

From the open door before which the miller was standing, there came the clatter of breakfast dishes and the sound of a Scripture text quoted in the voice of his mother. Above his head several strings of red pepper hung drying, and these rustled in the wind with a grating noise that seemed an accompaniment to the speaker in the kitchen.

"The Lord said that, an' I reckon He knew His own mind when He was speakin' it," remarked Sarah Revercomb as she put down the coffeepot.

"I declare there's mother at it again," observed Abel to himself with a frown — for it was Sarah's fate that an excess of virtue should have wrought all the evil of a positive vice. From the days of her infancy, when she had displayed in the cradle a power of self-denial at which her pastor had marvelled, she had continued to sacrifice her inclinations in a manner which had rendered unendurable the lives around her. Her parents had succumbed to it; her husband had died of it; her children had resigned themselves to it or rebelled against it according to the quality of their moral fibre. All her life she had laboured to make people happy, and the result of this exalted determination was a cowed and resentful family.

"Yo' buckwheat cakes will be stone cold if you don't come along in, Abel," she called now from the kitchen. "You've been lookin' kind of sallow these last days, so I've got a spoonful of molasses and sulphur, laid right by yo' plate."

"For heaven's sake, take it away," he retorted irritably. "I don't need it."

"I reckon I can tell by the look of you better than you can by the feelin'," rejoined Sarah grimly, "an' if you know what's good for you, you'll come and swallow it right down."

"I'll be hanged if I do!" exclaimed Abel without moving, and his tone implied that the ceaseless nagging had got at last on his nerves. He was a robust, well-built, red-brown young fellow, who smelt always of freshly ground meal, as though his body, from long usage, had grown to exhale the cleanly odour of the trade he followed. His hair was thick, dark and powdered usually with mill-dust. His eyes, of a clear bright hazel, deep-set and piercing, expressed a violence of nature which his firm, thin-lipped mouth, bare of beard or moustache, appeared to deny. A certain tenacity — a suggestion of stubbornness in the jaw, gave the final hint to his character, and revealed that temperamental intolerance of others which constitutes the strength as well as the weakness of the rustic who has risen out of his class. An opinion once embraced acquired the authority of a revelation; a passion once yielded to was transformed into a principle. Impulsive, generous, undisciplined, he represented, after all, but the reaction from the spirit of racial submission which was embodied in Reuben Merryweather. Tradition had bound Reuben in thongs of steel; Abel was conscious only of his liberated intelligence — of a passionate desire to test to the fullest the certainty of that liberation. As the elder had suffered beneath the weight of the established order, so the younger showed the disturbing effects of a freedom which had resulted from a too rapid change in economic conditions rather than from the more gradual evolution of class. When political responsibility was thrust on the plainer people instead of sought by them, it was but natural that the process of adjustment should appear rough rather than smooth. The land which had belonged to the few became after the war within reach of the many. At first the lower classes had held back, paralyzed by the burden of slavery. The soil, impoverished, wasted, untilled, rested under the shadow of the old names — the old customs. This mole-like blindness of the poorer whites persisted still for a quarter of a century; and the awakening was possible only after the newer generation had come to its growth. To them the past authority was but a shadow; the past reverence but a delusion. When the black labourer worked, not freely, but for hire, the wages of the white labourer went up as by magic. To rise under the old system had been so impossible that Abel's ancestors had got out of the habit of trying. The beneficent charity of the great landowners had extinguished the small incentive that might have remained — and to give had been so much the prerogative of a single class, that to receive had become a part of the privileges of another. In that pleasant idyllic period the one act which went unhonoured and unrewarded was the act of toil. So in the odour of shiftlessness Abel's father had died; so after ninety years his grandparents still sat by the hearth to which his mother had called him.

The house, an oblong frame building, newly shingled, was set back from the road in a straggling orchard of pear-trees, which bore a hard green fruit too sour to be used except in the form of preserves. Small shanties, including a woodhouse, a henhouse, and a smokehouse for drying bacon and hams, flanked the kitchen garden at the rear, while in front a short, gravelled path, bordered by portulaca, led to the paling gate at the branch road which ran into the turnpike a mile or so farther on. In Abel's dreams another house was already rising in the fair green meadow beyond the mill-race. He had consecrated a strip of giant pines to this purpose, and often, while he lingered in the door of his mill, he felt himself battling against the desire to take down his axe and strike his first blow toward the building of Molly's home. His mother might nag at him about Molly now, but let them be married, he told himself, with sanguine masculine assurance, and both women would reconcile themselves to a situation that neither could amend. Before the immediate ache of his longing for the girl, all other considerations evaporated to thin air. He would rather be unhappy with her, he thought passionately, than give her up!

"Abel, if you don't stop mopin' out thar an' come along in, I'll clear off the dishes!" called his mother again in her rasping voice which sounded as if she were choking in a perpetual spasm of moral indignation.

Jerking his shoulders slightly in an unspoken protest, Abel turned and entered the kitchen, where Sarah Revercomb — tall, spare and commanding — was preparing two bowls of mush for the aged people, who could eat only soft food and complained bitterly while eating that. She was a woman of some sixty years, with a stern handsome face under harsh bands of yellowish gray hair, and a mouth that sank in at one corner where her upper teeth had been drawn. Her figure was erect and flat as a lath, and this flatness was accentuated by the extreme scantiness of her drab calico dress. In her youth she had been beautiful in a hard, obvious fashion, and her eyes would have been still fine except for their bitter and hostile expression.

At the table there were Abner Revercomb, some ten or twelve years older than Abel, and Archie, the youngest child, whom Sarah adored and bullied. Blossom was busy about something in the cupboard, and on either side of the stove the old people sat with their small, suspicious eyes fixed on the pan of mush which Sarah was dividing with a large wooden spoon into two equal portions. Each feared that the other would receive the larger share, and each watched anxiously to see into which bowl the last spoonful would fall. For a week they had not spoken. Their old age was racked by a sharp and furious jealousy, which was quite as exclusive and not less exacting than their earlier passion of love.

With a finishing swirl of the big wooden spoon, the last drops of mush fell into grandfather's bowl, while a sly and injured look appeared instantly on the face of his wife. She was not hungry, but it annoyed her unspeakably that she should not be given the larger portion of food. Her rheumatism was severer than her husband's, and it seemed to her that this alone should have entitled her to the greater share of attention. There was a fierce contempt in her manner when she alluded to his age or to his infirmities, for although he was three years the elder, he was still chirpy and cheerful, with many summers, as she said resentfully, left in him yet.

"Breakfast is ready, grannies," remarked Sarah, who had allowed her coffee to grow cold while she looked after the others; "are you ready to eat?"

Grandmother's sly little eyes slanted over her hooked nose in the direction of the two bowls which her daughter-in-law was about to sprinkle with sugar. An idea entered her old head which made her chuckle with pleasure, and when her mush had been covered, she croaked out suddenly that she would take her breakfast unsweetened. "I'm too bad to take sugar — give that to him — he has a stomach to stand it," she said. Though her mouth watered for sweets, by this trick she had outwitted grandfather, and she felt that it was better than sugar.

The kitchen was a large, comfortable room, with strings of red peppers hanging from the ceiling, and boards of sliced apples drying on upturned flour barrels near the door. The bright homespun carpet left a strip of bare plank by the stove, and on this stood two hampers of black walnuts ready for storing. A few coloured prints, culled from garden magazines, were tacked on the wall, and these, without exception, represented blossoms of a miraculous splendour and size. In Sarah's straitened and intolerant soul a single passion had budded and expanded into fulfilment. Stern to all mortal things, to flowers alone she softened and grew gentle. From the front steps to the back, the kitchen was filled with them. Boxes, upturned flour barrels, corners of china-shelves and window-sills, showed bowers of luxuriant leaf and blossom. Her calla lilies had long been famous in the county; they had taken first prizes at innumerable fairs, and whenever there was a wedding or a funeral in the neighbourhood, the tall green stalks were clipped bare of bloom. Many were the dead hands that had been laid in the earth clasping her lilies. This thought had been for years the chief solace of her life, and she was accustomed to refer to it in the heat of religious debates, as though it offered infallible proof of the truth of her contention. After calla lilies, fuchias and tuberoses did best in her hands, and she had nursed a rare night blooming cereus for seven years in the hope that it would arrive at perfection the following June. Her marriage had been a disappointment to her, for her husband, a pleasant, good-looking fellow, had turned out an idler; her children, with the exception of Archie, the youngest, had never filled the vacancy in her life; but in her devotion to flowers there was something of the ecstasy and all of the self-abandonment she had missed in her human relations.

As he sat down at the table, the miller nodded carelessly to his brothers, who, having finished their bacon and cornbread, were waiting patiently until the buckwheat cakes should be ready. The coloured servant was never allowed to cook because, as Sarah said, "she could not abide niggers' ways," and Blossom, standing before the stove, with her apron held up to shield her face, was turning the deliciously browning cakes with a tin cake lifter.

"Ain't they done yet, daughter?" asked Abner in his amiable drawling voice. He was a silent, brooding man, heavily built, with a coarse reddish brown beard, stained with tobacco juice, which hung over his chest. Since the death of his wife, Blossom's mother, some fifteen years before, he had become more gloomy, more silent, more obstinately unapproachable. He was one who appeared to dwell always in the shadow of a great grief, and this made him generally respected by his neighbours though he was seldom sought.

People said of him that he was "a solid man and trustworthy," but they kept out of his way unless there was road mending or a sale of timber to be arranged.

Blossom tossed the buckwheat cakes into a plate and brought them to her father, who helped himself with his knife. When she passed them to Abel, who was feeding his favorite hound puppy, Moses, with bacon, he shook his head and drew back.

"Give them to mother, Blossom, she never eats a bite of breakfast," he said. He was the only one of Sarah's sons who ever considered her, but she was apt to regard this as a sign of weakness and to resent it with contumely.

"I ain't hungry," she replied grimly, "an' I reckon I'd rather you'd say less about my comfort, Abel, and do mo'. Buckwheat cakes don't come well from a son that flies into his mother's face on the matter of eternal damnation."

Without replying, Abel helped himself to the cakes she had refused and reached for the jug of molasses. Sarah was in one of her nagging moods, he knew, and she disturbed him but little. The delight and the desire of first love was upon him, and he was thinking rapturously of the big pine that would go to the building of Molly's house.

Grandmother, who wanted syrup, began to cry softly because she must eat her tasteless mush. "He's got the stomach to stand it," she repeated bitterly, while her tears fell into her bowl.

"What is it, granny? Will you try a bite of buckwheat?" inquired Sarah solicitously. She had never failed in her duty to her husband's parents, and this virtue also, she was inclined to use as a weapon of offense to her children.

"Give it to him — he's got teeth left to chaw on," whimpered grandmother, and her old chest heaved with bitterness because grandfather, who was three years the elder, still retained two jaw teeth on one side of his mouth.

A yellow-and-white cat, after vainly purring against grandmother's stool, had jumped on the window-sill in pursuit of a belated wasp, and Sarah, rushing to the rescue of her flowers, cuffed the animal soundly and placed her in grandfather's lap. He was a lover of cats — a harmless fancy which was a source of unceasing annoyance to his wife.

"Abel, I wish you'd mend that leak in the smokehouse after breakfast," remarked Sarah, in an aggressive tone that meant battle. "Two shingles are gone an' thare four more that want patchin'."

"I can't, I've got work to do at the mill," replied Abel, as he rose from his chair. "Solomon Hatch sent me his corn to grind and he's coming over to get the sacks."

"Well, I reckon I'm worth as much as Solomon Hatch, a little pasty faced critter like that," rejoined Sarah.

"Why can't Archie do it? What is he good for?"

"I'm going hunting with Jim Halloween," returned Archie sullenly, "he's got some young dogs he wants to break in to rabbit running."

"I might have known thar warn't nobody to do what I ask 'em," observed Sarah in the voice and manner of a martyr. "It's rabbits or girls, one or the other, and if it ain't an old hare it's some light-moraled critter like Molly Merryweather."

Abel's face had changed to a dull red and his eyes blazed.

"Say anything against Molly, mother, an' I'll never speak to you again!" he cried out angrily.

"Thar, thar, ma, you an' Abel are too pepper tongued to get into a quarrel," remarked Abner, the silent, who seldom spoke except for the promotion of peace. "I'll mend the roof for you whenever you want it."

"I reckon I've got as much right to use my tongue as anybody else has," retorted Sarah, indignant because a solution had been found and her grievance was annulled. "If a girl ain't a fast one that gets as good as engaged to half the young men in the county, then I'd like to know who is, that's all?"

Then, as Abel called sharply to his fox-hound puppy and flung himself from the room, she turned away and went to sprinkle her calla lilies. There was an agony in her breast, though she would have bitten out her tongue sooner than have confessed it. Her strength lay in the fact that never in her life had she admitted even to herself, that she had been in the wrong.

CHAPTER V

THE MILL

Outside, a high wind was driving the fallen leaves in swirls and eddies, and as Abel crossed the road to the mill, he smelt the sharp autumn scent of the rotting mould under the trees. Frost still sparkled on the bright green grasses that had overgrown the sides of the mill-race, and the poplar log over the stream was as wet as though the dancing shallows had skimmed it. Over the motionless wheel the sycamore shed its broad yellow leaves into the brook, where they fluttered downward with a noise that was like the wind in the tree-tops.

Inserting a key into the rusty lock, which was much too large for it, Abel opened the door, and counted Solomon Hatch's sacks of grist, which stood in a row beside a raised platform where an old mill-stone was lying. Other sacks belonging to other farmers were arranged in an orderly group in one corner, and his eye passed to them in a businesslike appraisement of their contents. According to an established custom of toll, the eighth part of the grain belonged to the miller; and this had enabled him to send his own meal to the city markets, where there was an increasing demand for the coarse, waterground sort. Some day he purposed to turn out the old worn-out machinery and supply its place with modern inventions, but as yet this ambition was remote, and the mill, worked after the process of an earlier century, had raised his position to one of comparative comfort and respectability. He was known to be a man of character and ambition. Already his name had been mentioned as a possible future representative of the labouring classes in the Virginia assembly. "There is no better proof of the grit that is in the plain people than the rise of Abel Revercomb out of Abner, his father," some one had said of him. And from the day when he had picked his first blackberries for old Mr. Jonathan and tied his earnings in a stocking foot as the beginning of a fund for schooling, the story of his life had been one of struggle and of endurance. Transition had been the part of the generation before him. In him the democratic impulse was no longer fitful and uncertain, but had expanded into a stable and indestructible purpose.

Before starting the wheel, which he did by thrusting his arm through the window and lifting the gate on the mill-race, Abel took up a broom, made of sedges bound crudely together, and swept the smooth bare floor, which was polished like that of a ballroom by the sacks of meal that had been dragged back and forth over the boards. From the rafters above, long pale cobwebs were blown gently in the draught between door and window, and when the mill had started, the whole building reverberated to the slow revolutions of the wheel outside.

The miller had poured Solomon Hatch's grist into the hopper, and was about to turn the wooden crank at the side, when a shadow fell over the threshold, and Archie Revercomb appeared, with a gun on his shoulder and several fox-hounds at his heels.

"You'll have to get Abner to help you dress that mill-rock, Abel," he said, "I'm off for the morning. That's a good pup of yours, but he's old enough to begin learning."

With the inherited idleness of the Revercombs, he combined the headstrong impulses and dogged obstinacy of his mother's stock, yet because of his personal charm, these faults were not only tolerated, but even admired by his family.

"You're always off in the mornings when there's work to be done," replied Abel, "but for heaven's sake, bring home a string of hares to put ma into a better humour. She whets her tongue on me and I'll be hanged if it's right."

"She never used to do it till you went over to Mr. Mullen's church and fell in love with Molly Merryweather. Great Scott, I'm glad I don't stand in either of your shoes when it comes to that. Life's too short to pay for your religion or your sweetheart every day you live."

"It would have been the same anyway — she's put out with me about nothing. I had a right to go to Old Church if I wanted to, and what on earth has she got against Mr. Mullen anyway, except that he couldn't recite the first chapter in Chronicles? What kind of religion does that take, I'd like to know?"

The meal poured softly out of the valve into the trough beneath, and lifting a wooden scoop, he bent over and scattered the pile in the centre. A white dust had settled on his hair and clothes, and this accentuated the glow in his face and gave to his whole appearance a picturesque and slightly theatrical cast.

"If it hadn't been Molly, it would have been some one else," he added impulsively. "Ma would be sure to hate any woman she thought I'd fallen in love with. It's born in her to be contrary just as it is in that hopvine out yonder that you can't train up straight."

"All the same, if I were going through fire and water for a girl, I'd be pretty sure to choose one that would make it worth my while at the end. I wouldn't put up with all that hectoring for the sake of anybody that was as sweet to half a dozen other fellows as she was to me."

Abel's face darkened threateningly under his silvered hair.

"If you are trying to hint anything against Molly, you'd as well stop in the beginning," he said. "It isn't right — I'll be hanged if it is! — that every man in the county should be down on a little thing like that, no bigger than a child. It wasn't her fault, was it, if her father played false with her mother?"

"Oh, I'm not blaming her, am I? As far as that goes all the women like her well enough, and so do all the dogs and the children. The trouble seems to be, doesn't it, merely that the men like her too much? She's got a way with her, there's no question about that."

"Why in thunder do you want to blacken her character?"

"I wasn't blackenin' her character. I merely meant that she was a flirt, and you know that as well as I do — better, I shouldn't wonder."

"It's the way she was brought up. Her mother was crazy for ten years before she died, and she taught Molly all that foolishness about the meanness of men."

"Oh, well, it's all right," said Archie carelessly, "only look out that you don't go too near the fire and get scorched."

Whistling to the hounds that were nosing among some empty barrels in a dark corner, he shouldered his gun more firmly and went off to his hunt.

After he had gone, the miller stood for a long while, watching the meal pour from the valve. A bit of chaff had settled on his lashes, but without moving his hand to brush it away, he shook his head once or twice with the gesture of an animal that is stung by a wasp. "Why do they keep at me about her?" he asked passionately. "Is it true that she is only playing with me as she plays with the others?" — but the pain was too keen, and turning away with a sigh, he rested his elbows on the sill of the window and looked out at the moving wheel under the gauzy shadows. The sound of the water as it rushed through the mill-race into the buckets and then fell from the buckets into the whirlpool beneath, was loud in his ears while his quick glance, passing over the drifting yellow leaves of the sycamore, discerned a spot of vivid red in the cornlands beyond. The throbbing of his pulses rather than the assurance of his eyes told him that Molly was approaching; and as the bit of colour drew nearer amid the stubble, he recognized the jacket of crimson wool that the girl wore as a wrap on chill autumn mornings. On her head there was a small knitted cap matching the jacket, and this, resting on her riotous brown curls, lent a touch of boyish gallantry to her slender figure. Like most women of mobile features and ardent temperament, her beauty depended so largely upon her mood that Abel had seen her change from positive plainness to amazing loveliness in the space of a minute. Her small round face, with its wonderful eyes, dimpled now over the crimson jacket.

"Abel!" she called softly, and paused with one foot on the log while the water sparkled beneath her. Ten minutes before he had vowed to himself that she had used him badly and he would hold off until she made sufficient amends; but in forming this resolution, he had reckoned without the probable intervention of Molly.

"I thought — as long as I was going by — that I'd stop and speak to you," she said.

He shook his head, unsoftened as yet by her presence. "You didn't treat me fair yesterday, Molly," he answered.

"Oh, I wanted to tell you about that. I quite meant to go with you — only it went out of my head."

"That's a pretty excuse, isn't it, to offer a man?"

"Well, you aren't the only one I've offered it to," she dimpled enchantingly, "the rector had to be satisfied with it as well. He asked me, too, and when I forgot I'd promised you, I said I'd go with him to see old Abigail. Then I forgot that, too," she added with a penitent sigh, "and went down to the low grounds."

"You managed to come up in time to meet Mr. Jonathan at the cross-roads," he commented with bitterness.

A less daring adventurer than Molly would have hesitated at his tone and grown cautious, but a certain blithe indifference to the consequences of her actions was a part of her lawless inheritance from the Gays.

"I think him very good-looking, don't you?" she inquired sweetly.

"Good-looking? I should think not — a fat fop like that."

"Is he fat? I didn't notice it — but, of course, I didn't mean that he was good-looking in your way, Abel."

The small flowerlike shadows trembled across her face, and beneath her feet the waves churned a creamy foam that danced under her like light. His eyes warmed to her, yet he held back, gripped by a passion of jealousy. For the first time he felt that he was brought face to face with a rival who might prove to have the advantage.

"I am coming over!" called Molly suddenly, and a minute later she stood in the square of sunshine that entered the mill door.

Had he preserved then his manner of distant courtesy, it is probable that she would have melted, for it was not in her temperament to draw back while her prey showed an inclination for flight. But it was his nature to warm too readily and to cool too late, a habit of constitution which causes, usually, a tragedy in matters of sex.

"You oughtn't to treat me so, Molly!" he exclaimed reproachfully, and made a step toward her.

"I couldn't help forgetting, could I? It was your place to remind me."

Thrust, to his surprise, upon the defensive, he reached for her hand, which was withdrawn after it had lain an instant in his.

"Well, it was my fault, then," he said with a generosity that did him small service. "The next time I'll remind you every minute."

She smiled radiantly as he looked at her, and he felt that her indiscretions, her lack of constancy, her unkindness even, were but the sportive and innocent freaks of a child. In his rustic sincerity he was forever at the point of condemning her and forever relenting before the appealing sweetness of her look. He told himself twenty times a day that she flirted outrageously with him, though he still refused to admit that in her heart she was to blame for her flirting. A broad and charitable distinction divided always the thing that she was from the thing that she did. It was as if his love discerned in her a quality of soul of which she was still unconscious.

"Molly," he burst out almost fiercely, "will you marry me?"

The smile was still in her eyes, but a slight frown contracted her forehead.

"I've told you a hundred times that I shall never marry anybody," she answered, "but that if I ever did ——"

"Then you'd marry me."

"Well, if I were obliged to marry *somebody*, I'd rather marry you than anybody else."

"So you do like me a little?"

"Yes, I suppose I like you a little — but all men are the same — mother used always to tell me so."

Poor distraught Janet Merryweather! There were times when he was seized with a fierce impatience of her, for it seemed to him that her ghost stood, like the angel with the drawn sword, before the closed gates of his paradise. He remembered her as a passionate frail creature, with accusing eyes that had never lost the expression with which they had met and passed through some hour of despair and disillusionment.

"But how could she judge, Molly? How could she judge?" he pleaded. "She was ill, she wasn't herself, you must know it. All men are not alike. Didn't I fight her battles more than once, when you were a child?"

"I know, I know," she answered gratefully, "and I love you for it. That's why I don't mind telling you what I've never told a single one of the others. I haven't any heart, Abel, that's the truth. It's all play to me, and I like the game sometimes and sometimes I hate it. Yet, whether I like it or hate it, I always go on because I can't help it. Your mother once said I had a devil inside of me and perhaps she was right — it may be that devil that drives me on and won't let me stop even when I'm tired, and it all bores me. The rector thinks that I'll marry him and turn pious and take to Dorcas societies, and Jim Halloween thinks I'll marry him and grow thrifty and take to turkey raising — and you believe in the bottom of your heart that in the end I'll fall into your arms and find happiness with your mother. But you're all wrong — all — all — and I shan't do any of the things you expect of me. I am going to stay here as long as grandfather lives, so I can take care of him, and then I'll run off somewhere to the city and trim hats for a living. When I was at school in Applegate I trimmed hats for all of the pupils."

"Oh, Molly, Molly, I'll not give you up! Some day you'll see things differently."

"Never — never. Now, I've warned you and it isn't my fault if you keep on after this."

"But you do like me a little, haven't you said so?"

Her frown deepened.

"Yes, I do like you — a little."

"Then I'll keep on hoping, anyhow."

Her smile came back, but this time it had grown mocking.

"No, you mustn't hope," she answered, "at least," she corrected provokingly, "you mustn't hope — too hard."

"I'll hope as hard as the devil, darling — and, Molly, if you marry me, you know, you won't have to live with my mother."

"I like that, even though I'm not going to marry you."

"Come here," he drew her toward the door, "and I'll show you where our house will stand. Do you see that green rise of ground over the meadow?"

"Yes, I see it," her tone was gentler.

"I've chosen that site for a home," he went on, "and I'm saving a good strip of pine — you can see it over there against the horizon. I've half a mind to take down my axe and cut down the biggest of the trees this afternoon!"

If his ardour touched her there was no sign of it in the movement with which she withdrew herself from his grasp.

"You'd better finish your grinding. There isn't the least bit of a hurry," she returned with a smile.

"If you'll go with me, Molly, you may take your choice and I'll cut the tree down for you."

"But I can't, Abel, because I've promised Mr. Mullen to visit his mother."

The glow faded from his eyes and a look like that of an animal under the lash took its place.

"Come with me, not with him, Molly, you owe me that much," he entreated.

"But he's such a good man, and he preaches such beautiful sermons."

"He does — I know he does, but I love you a thousand times better."

"Oh, he loves me because I am pretty and hard to win — just as you do," she retorted. "If I lost my hair or my teeth how many of you, do you think, would care for me to-morrow?"

"I should — before God I'd love you just as I do now," he answered with passion.

A half mocking, half tender sound broke from her lips.

"Then why don't you — every one of you, fall head over ears in love with Judy Hatch?" she inquired.

"I don't because I loved you first, and I can't change, however badly you treat me. I'm sometimes tempted to think, Molly, that mother is right, and you are possessed of a devil."

"Your mother is a hard woman, and I pity the wife you bring home to her."

The softness had gone out of her voice at the mention of Sarah's name, and she had grown defiant and reckless.

"I don't think you are just to my mother, Molly," he said after a moment, "she has a kind heart at bottom, and when she nags at you it is most often for your good."

"I suppose it was for my mother's good that she kept her from going to church and made the old minister preach a sermon against her?"

"That's an old story — you were only a month old. Can't you forget it?"

"I'll never forget it — not even at the Day of Judgment. I don't care how I'm punished."

Her violence, which seemed to him sinful and unreasonable, reduced him to a silence that goaded her to a further expression of anger. While she spoke he watched her eyes shine green in the sunlight, and he told himself that despite her passionate loyalty to her mother, the blood of the Gays ran thicker in her veins than that of the Merryweathers. Her impulsiveness, her pride, her lack of self-control, all these marked her kinship not to Reuben Merryweather, but to Jonathan Gay. The qualities against which she rebelled cried aloud in her rebellion. The inheritance she abhorred endowed her with the capacity for that abhorrence. While she accused the Gays, she stood revealed a Gay in every tone, in every phrase, in every gesture.

"It isn't you, Molly, that speaks like that," he said, "it's something in you." She had tried his patience almost to breaking, yet in the very strain and suffering she put upon him, she had, all unconsciously to them both, strengthened the bond by which she held him.

"If I'd known you were going to preach, I shouldn't have stopped to speak to you," she rejoined coldly. "I'd rather hear Mr. Mullen."

He stood the attack without flinching, his hazel eyes full of an angry light and the sunburnt colour in his face paling a little. Then when she had finished, he turned slowly away and began tightening the feed strap of the mill.

For a minute Molly paused on the threshold in the band of sunlight. "For God's sake speak, Abel," she said at last, "what pleasure do you think I find in being spiteful when you won't strike back?"

"I'll never strike back; you may keep up your tirading forever."

"I wouldn't have said it if I'd known you'd take it so quietly."

"Quietly? Did you expect me to pick you up and throw you into the hopper?"

"I shouldn't have cared — it would have been better than your expression at this minute. It's all your fault anyway, for not falling in love with Judy Hatch, as I told you to."

"Don't worry. Perhaps I shall in the end. Your tantrums would wear the patience of a Job out at last. It seems that you can't help despising a man just as soon as he happens to love you."

"I wonder if that's true?" she said a little sadly, turning away from him until her eyes rested on the green rise of ground over the meadow, "I've seen men like that as soon as they were sure of their wives, and I've hated them for it."

"What I can't understand," he pursued, not without bitterness, "is why in thunder a man or a woman who isn't married should put up with it for an instant?"

At his words she left the door and came slowly back to his side, where he bent over the meal trough.

"The truth is that I like you better than anyone in the world, except grandfather," she said, "but I hate love-making. When I see that look in a man's face and feel the touch of his hands upon me I want to strike out and kill. My mother was that way before I was born, and I drank it in with her milk, I suppose."

"I know it isn't your fault, Molly, and yet, and yet, and yet —"

She sighed, half pitying his suffering, half impatient of his obtuseness. As he turned away, her gaze rested on his sunburnt neck, rising from the collar of his blue flannel shirt, and she saw that his hair ended in a short, boyish ripple that was powdered with mill-dust. A sudden tenderness for him as for a child or an animal pierced her like a knife.

"I shouldn't mind your kissing me just once, if you'd like to, Abel," she said.

A little later, when he had helped her over the stile and she was returning home through the cornlands, she asked herself with passionate self-reproach why she had yielded to pity? She had felt sorry for Abel, and because she had felt sorry she had allowed him to kiss her. "Only I meant him to do it gently and soberly," she thought, "and he was so rough and fierce that he frightened me. I suppose most girls like that kind of thing, but I don't, and I shan't, if I live to be a hundred. I've got no belief in it — I've got no belief in anything, that is the trouble. I'm twisted out of shape, like the crooked sycamore by the mill-race."

A sigh passed her lips, and, as if in answer to the sound, there came the rumble of approaching wheels in the turnpike. As she climbed the low rail fence which divided the corn-lands from the highway, she met the old family carriage from Jordan's Journey returning with the two ladies on the rear seat. The younger, a still pretty woman of fifty years, with shining violet eyes that seemed always apologizing for their owner's physical weakness, leaned out and asked the girl, in a tone of gentle patronage, if she would ride with the driver?

"Thank you, Mrs. Gay, it's only a quarter of a mile and I don't mind the walk."

"We've brought an overcoat — Kesiah and I — a good thick one, for your grandfather. It worried us last winter that he went so lightly clad during the snowstorms."

Molly's face changed, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" she exclaimed, losing her manner of distant politeness. "I've been trying to persuade him to buy one, but he hates to spend money on himself."

Kesiah, who had leaned back during the conversation, with the scowling look she wore when her heart was moved, nodded grimly while she felt in the black travelling bag she carried for Mrs. Gay's salts. She was one of those unfortunate women of a past generation, who, in offering no allurement to the masculine eye, appeared to defeat the single end for which woman was formed. As her very right to existence lay in her possible power to attract, the denial of that power by nature, or the frustration of it by circumstances, had deprived her, almost from the cradle, of her only authoritative reason for being.

Her small, short-sighted eyes, below a false front which revealed rather than obscured her bare temples, flitted from object to object as though in the vain pursuit of some outside justification of her indelicacy in having permitted herself to be born.

"Samson tells me that my son has come, Molly," said Mrs. Gay, in a flutter of emotion. "Have you had a glimpse of him yet?"

The girl nodded. "He took supper at our house the night he got here."

"It was such a surprise. Was he looking well?"

"Very well, I thought, but it was the first time I had seen him, you know."

"Ah, I forgot. Are you sure you won't get in, child? Well, drive on, Samson, and be very careful of that bird cage."

Samson drove on at the command, and Molly, plodding obstinately after the carriage, was enveloped shortly in the cloud of dust that floated after the wheels.

CHAPTER VI

TREATS OF THE LADIES' SPHERE

As THE carriage rolled up the drive, there was a flutter of servants between the white columns, and Abednego, the old butler, pushed aside the pink-turbaned maids and came down to assist his mistress to alight.

"Take the bird cage, Abednego, I've bought a new canary," said Mrs. Gay. "Here, hold my satchel, Nancy, and give Patsey the wraps and umbrellas."

She spoke in a sweet, helpless voice, and this helplessness was expressed in every lovely line of her figure. The most casual observer would have discerned that she dominated not by force, but by sentiment, that she had surrendered all rights in order to grasp more effectively at all privileges. She was clinging and small and delicate, and her eyes, her features, her plaintive gestures, united in an irresistible appeal to the emotions.

"Where is Jonathan?" she asked, "I hoped he would welcome me."

"So I do, dearest mother — so I do," replied the young man, running hurriedly down the steps and slipping his arm about her. "You came a minute or two earlier than I expected you, or I should have met you in the drive."

Half supporting, half carrying her, he led the way into the house and placed her on a sofa in the long drawing-room.

"I am afraid the journey has been too much for you," he said tenderly. "Shall I tell Abednego to bring you a glass of wine."

"Kesiah will mix me an egg and a spoonful of sherry, dear, she knows just how much is good for me."

Kesiah, still grasping her small black bag, went into the dining-room and returned, bearing a beaten egg, which she handed to her sister. In her walk there was the rigid austerity of a saint who has adopted saintliness not from inclination, but from the force of a necessity against which rebellion has been in vain. Her plain, prominent features wore, from habit, a look of sullen martyrdom that belied her natural kindness of heart; and even her false brown front was arranged in little hard, flat curls, as though an artificial ugliness were less reprehensible in her sight than an artificial beauty.

In the midst of the long room flooded with sunshine, the little lady reclined on her couch and sipped gently from the glass Kesiah had handed her. The tapestried furniture was all in soft rose, a little faded from age, and above the high white wainscoting on the plastered walls, this same delicate colour was reflected in the rich brocaded gowns in the family portraits. In the air there was the faint sweet scent of cedar logs that burned on the old andirons.

"So you came all the way home to see your poor useless mother," murmured Mrs. Gay, shielding her cheek from the firelight with a peacock hand-screen.

"I wanted to see for myself how you stand it down here — and, by Jove, it's worse even than I imagined!

How the deuce have you managed to drag out twenty years in a wilderness like this among a tribe of barbarians?"

"It is a great comfort to me, dear, to think that I came here on your uncle's account and that I am only following his wishes in making the place my home. He loved the perfect quiet and restfulness of it."

"Quiet! With that population of roosters making the dawn hideous! I'd choose the quiet of Piccadilly before that of a barnyard."

"You aren't used to country noises yet, and I suppose at first they are trying."

"Do you drive? Do you walk? How do you amuse yourself?"

"One doesn't have amusement when one is a hopeless invalid; one has only medicines. No, the roads are too heavy for driving except for a month or two in the summer. I can't walk, of course, because of my heart, and as there has been no man on the place for ten years, I do not feel that it is safe for Kesiah to go off the lawn by herself. Once she got into quite a dreadful state about her liver and lack of exercise — (poor dear mother used to say that the difference between the liver of a lady and that of another person, was that one required no exercise and the other did) — but Kesiah, who is the best creature in the world, is very eccentric in some ways, and she imagines that her health suffers when she is kept in the house for several years. Once she got into a temper and walked a mile or two in the road, but when she returned I was in such a state of nervousness that she promised me never to leave the lawn again unless a gentleman was with her."

"What an angel you must be to have suffered so much and complained so little!" he exclaimed with fervour, kissing her hand.

Her eyes, which reminded him of dying violets, drooped over him above the peacock feathers she waved gently before her.

"Poor Kesiah, it is hard on her, too," she observed, "and I sometimes think she is unjust enough to blame me in her heart."

"But she doesn't feel things as you do, one can tell that to look at her."

"She isn't so sensitive and silly, you dear boy, but my poor nerves are responsible for that, you must remember. If Kesiah had been a man she would have been an artist, and it was really a pity that she happened to be born a woman. When she was young she had a perfect mania for drawing, and it used to distress mother so much. A famous portrait painter — I can't recall his name though I am sure it began with S — saw one of her sketches by accident and insisted that we ought to send her to Paris to study. Kesiah was wild to go at the time, but of course it was out of the question that a Virginia lady should go off by herself and paint perfectly nude people in a foreign city. There was a dreadful scene, I remember, and Kesiah even wrote to Uncle William Burwell and asked him to come down and win mother over. He came immediately, for he was the kindest soul, but, of course, after he understood, he decided against it. Why on earth should a girl want to go streaking across the water to study art, he asked, when she had a home she could stay in and men folk who could look after her? They both told her she made herself ridiculous when she talked of ambition, and as they wouldn't promise her a penny to live on, she was obliged in the end to give up the idea. She nursed mother very faithfully, I must say, as long as she lived, never leaving her a minute night or day for the last year of her illness. Don't misjudge poor Kesiah, Jonathan, she has a good heart at bottom, though she has always been a little soured on account of her disappointment."

"Oh, she was cut out for an old maid, one can see that," rejoined Gay, only half interested in the history of his aunt, for he seldom exerted his imagination except under pressure of his desires, "and, by the way, mother, what kind of man was my Uncle Jonathan?"

"The dearest creature, my son, heaven alone knows what his loss meant to me! Such consideration! Such generosity! Such delicacy! He and Kesiah never got on well, and this was the greatest distress to me."

"Did you ever hear any queer stories about him? Was he — well — ah, wild, would you say?"

"Wild? Jonathan, I am surprised at you! Why, during the twenty years that I knew him he never let fall so much as a single indelicate word in my presence."

"I don't mean that exactly — but what about his relations with the women around here?"

She flinched as if his words had struck her a blow.

"Dear Jonathan, your poor uncle would never have asked such a question."

Above the mantel there was an oil portrait of the elder Jonathan at the age of three, painted astride the back of an animal that disported the shape of a lion under the outward covering of a lamb.

"Ah, that's just it," commented Gay, while his inquiring look hung on the picture. After a minute of uncertainty, his curiosity triumphed over his discretion, and he put, in an apologetic tone, an equally indelicate question. "What about old Reuben Merryweather's granddaughter? Has she been provided for?"

For an instant Mrs. Gay looked at him with shining, reproachful eyes under a loosened curl of fair hair which was threaded with silver. Those eyes, very blue, very innocent, seemed saying to him, "Oh, be careful, I am so sensitive. Remember that I am a poor frail creature, and do not hurt me. Let me remain still in my charmed circle where I have always lived, and where no unpleasant reality has ever entered." The quaint peacock screen, brought from China by old Jonathan, cast a shadow on her cheek, which was flushed to the colour of a faded rose leaf.

"Yes, the girl is an orphan, it is very sad," she replied, and her tone added, "but what can I do about it? I am a woman and should know nothing of such matters!"

"Was she mentioned in my uncle's will, do you remember?"

His handsome, well-coloured face had taken a sudden firmness of outline, and even the sagging flesh of his chin appeared to harden with the resolve of the moment. Across his forehead, under the fine dark hair which had worn thin on the temples, three frowning wrinkles leaped out as if in response to some inward pressure.

"There was something — I can't remember just what it was — Mr. Chamberlayne will tell you about it when he comes down to-morrow to talk over business with Kesiah. They keep all such things away from me out of consideration for my heart. But I've never doubted for an instant that your uncle did everything that was just and generous in the matter. He sent the girl to a good school in Applegate, I remember, and there was a bequest of some sort, I believe — something that she comes into on her twenty-first birthday."

"She isn't twenty-one then, is she?"

"I don't know, Jonathan, I really can't remember."

"Perhaps Aunt Kesiah can tell me something about her?"

"Oh, she can and she will — but Kesiah is so violent in all her opinions! I had to ask her never to mention Brother Jonathan's name to me because she made me quite ill once by some dreadful hints she let fall about him."

She leaned back wearily as if the conversation had exhausted her, while the peacock firescreen slipped from her hand and dropped on the white fur rug at her feet.

"If you'll call Kesiah, Jonathan, I'll go upstairs for a rest," she said gently, yet with a veiled reproach. "The journey tired me, but I forgot it in the pleasure of seeing you."

All contrition at once, he hastily summoned Kesiah from the storeroom, and between them, with several solicitious maids in attendance, they carried the fragile little lady up to her chamber, where a fire of resinous pine was burning in the big colonial fireplace.

An hour afterwards, when Kesiah had seen her sister peacefully dozing, she went, for the first time since her return, into her own bedroom, and stood looking down on the hearth, where the servants had forgotten to light the sticks that were laid cross-wise on the andirons. It was the habit of those about her to forget her existence, except when she was needed to render service, and after more than fifty years of such omissions, she had ceased, even in her thoughts, to pass judgment upon them. In her youth she had rebelled fiercely — rebelled against nature, against the universe, against the fundamental injustice that divided her sister's lot from her own. Generations of ancestors had bred in her the belief that woman existed only to win love or to bestow it. Inheritance, training, temperament, all combined to develop the racial instinct within her, yet something stronger than these — some external shaping of clay — had unfitted her for the purpose for which she was designed. And since, in the eyes of her generation, any self-expression from a woman, which was not associated with sex, was an affront to convention, that single gift of hers was doomed to wither away in the hot-house air that surrounded her. A man would have struck for freedom, and have made a career for himself in the open world, but her nature was rooted deep in the rich and heavy soil from which she had tried to detach it. Years after her first fight, on the day of her mother's death, she had suffered a brief revival of youth; and then she had pulled in vain at the obstinate tendrils that held her to the spot in which she had grown. She was no longer penniless, she was no longer needed, but she was crushed. The power of revolt was the gift of youth. Middle-age could put forth only a feeble and ineffectual resistance

— words without passion, acts without abandonment. At times she still felt the old burning sense of injustice, the old resentment against life, but this passed quickly now, and she grew quiet as soon as her eyes fell on the flat, spare figure, a little bent in the chest, which her mirror revealed to her. The period was full of woman's advancement — a peaceful revolution had triumphed around her — yet she had taken no part in it, and the knowledge left her unmoved. She had read countless novels that acclaimed hysterically the wrongs of her sex, but beneath the hysterics she had perceived the fact that the newer woman who grasped successfully the right to live, was as lavishly endowed as her elder sister who had petitioned merely for the privilege to love. The modern heroine could still charm even after she had ceased to desire to. Neither in the new fiction nor in the old was there a place for the unhappy woman who desired to charm but could not; she remained what she had always been — a tragic perversion of nature which romance and realism conspired to ignore. Women in novels had revolted against life as passionately as she — but one and all they had revolted in graceful attitudes and with abundant braids of hair. A false front not only extinguished sentiment — it put an end to rebellion.

"Miss Kesiah, dar's Marse Reuben in de hall en he sez he'd be moughty glad ef'n you'd step down en speak a wud wid 'im."

"In a moment, Abednego. I must take off my things."

Withdrawing the short jet-headed pins from her bonnet with a hurried movement, she stabbed them into the hard round pincushion on her bureau, and after throwing a knitted cape over her shoulders, went down the wide staircase to where Reuben awaited her in the hall. As she walked she groped slightly and peered ahead of her with her nervous, short-sighted gaze.

At the foot of the staircase, the old man was standing in a patient attitude, resting upon his wooden leg, which was slightly in advance of his sound one. His fine bearded face might have been the face of a scholar, except for its roughened skin and the wistful, dog-like look in the eyes.

In response to Kesiah's greeting, he explained that he had come at once to acknowledge the gift of the overcoat and to "pay his respects."

"I am glad you like it," she answered, and because her heart was swelling with kindness, she stammered and grew confused while the anxious frown deepened between her eyebrows. A morbid horror of making herself ridiculous prevented her always from making herself understood.

"It will be very useful to me, ma'am, when I am out of doors in bad weather," he replied, wondering if he had offended her by his visit.

"We got it for that purpose," and becoming more embarrassed, she added hastily, "How is the red cow, Mr. Merryweather?"

"She mends slowly, ma'am. I am givin' her bran mash twice a day and keepin' her in the barn. Have you noticed the hogs? They're a fine lot this year and we'll get some good hams at the killin'."

"No, I hadn't looked at them, but I've been struck with the corn you've brought up recently from the low grounds."

For a minute or two they discussed the crops, both painfully ill at ease and uncertain whether to keep up the conversation or to let it trail off into silence. Then at the first laboured pause, Reuben repeated his message to Mrs. Gay and stamped slowly out of the back door into the arms of Jonathan, who was about to enter.

"Halloo! So it's you!" exclaimed the young man in the genial tone which seemed at once to dispel Kesiah's embarrassment. "I've wanted to talk with you for two days, but I shan't detain you now for I happen to know that your granddaughter is hunting for you already. I'll come up to-morrow and chat awhile in the barn."

Reuben bowed and passed on, a little flattered by the other's intimate tone, while Gay followed Kesiah into the drawing-room, and put a question to her which had perplexed him since the night of his arrival.

"Aunt Kesiah, was old Reuben Merryweather on friendly terms with my uncle?"

She started and looked at him with a nervous twitching of her eyelids.

"I think so, Jonathan, at least they appeared to be. Old Reuben was born on the place when the Jordans still lived here, and I am sure your uncle felt that it would be unjust to remove him. Then they fought through the war together and were both dangerously wounded in the same charge."

He gazed at her a moment in silence, narrowing his intense blue eyes which were so like the eyes of Reuben's granddaughter.

"Did my uncle show any particular interest in the girl?" he inquired, and added a little bitterly, "It's not fair to me that I shouldn't know just where I am standing."

"Yes, he did show a particular interest in her and was anxious that she should be educated above her station. She was even sent off to a boarding-school in Applegate, but she ran away during the middle of the second session and came home. Her grandfather was ill with pneumonia, and she is sincerely devoted to him, I believe."

"Was there any mention of her in Uncle Jonathan's will?"

"None whatever. He left instructions with Mr. Chamberlayne, however, which are to be made known next April on Molly's twenty-first birthday. It is all rather mysterious, but we only know that he owned considerable property in the far West, which he left away from us and in trust to his lawyer. I suppose he thought your mother would not be alive when the girl came of age; for the doctors had agreed that she had only a few years to live at the utmost."

"What in the devil did my poor mother have to do with it?"

She hesitated an instant, positively scowling in her perplexity.

"Only that I think — I believe your Uncle Jonathan would have married the girl's mother — Janet Merryweather — but for your mother's influence."

"How in the deuce! You mean he feared the effect on her?"

"He broke it to her once — his intention, I mean — and for several days afterwards we quite despaired of her life. It was then that she made him promise —

he was quite distracted with remorse for he adored Angela — that he would never allude to it again while she was alive. We thought then that it would be only for a short while, but she has outlived him ten years in spite of her heart disease. One can never rely on doctors, you know."

"But what became of the girl — of Janet Merryweather, I mean?"

"That was the sad part, though it happened so long ago — twenty years — that people have almost forgotten. It seems that your uncle had been desperate about her for a time — before Angela came to live with him — and Janet had counted rather recklessly upon his keeping his word and marrying her as he had promised. When her trouble came she went quite out of her mind — perfectly harmless, I believe, and with lucid intervals in which she suffered from terrible melancholia. Her child inherits many of her characteristics, I am told, though I've never heard any harm of the girl except that she flirts with all the clowns in the neighbourhood."

"Uncle Jonathan appears to have been too ready with his promises, but, I suppose, he thought there was a difference between his obligation to Janet Merryweather and to his brother's widow?"

"There was a difference, of course. Janet Merryweather could hardly have had Angela's sensitive feelings — or at least it's a comfort to think that, even if it happens not to be true. Before the war one hardly ever heard of that class, mother used to say, it was so humble and unpresuming — but in the last twenty-five or thirty years it has overrun everything and most of the land about here has passed into its possession."

She checked herself breathlessly, surprised and indignant that she should have expressed her feelings so openly.

"Yes, I dare say," returned Jonathan — "The miller Revercomb is a good example, I imagine, of just the thing you are speaking of — a kind of new plant that has sprung up like fire-weed out of the ashes. Less than half a century produced him, but he's here to stay, of that I am positive. After all, why shouldn't he, when we get down to the question? He — or the stock he represents, of course — is already getting hold of the soil and his descendants will run the State financially as well as politically, I suppose. We can't hold on, the rest of us — we're losing grip — and in the end it will be pure pluck that counts wherever it comes from."

"Ah, it's just that — pluck — but put the miller in the crucible and you'll find how little pure gold there is to him. It is not in prosperity, but in poverty that the qualities of race come to the surface, and this remarkable miller of yours would probably be crushed by a weight to which poor little Mrs. Bland at the post-office — she was one of the real Carters, you know — would hardly bend her head."

"Perhaps you're right," he answered, and laughed shortly under his breath, "but in that case how would you fix the racial characteristics of that little firebrand, Molly Merryweather?"

CHAPTER VII

GAY RUSHES INTO A QUARREL AND SECURES A KISS

At dawn next morning Jonathan Gay, who had spent a restless night in his uncle's old room, came out into the circular drive with his gun on his shoulder, and strolled in the direction of the meadows beyond the haunted Poplar Spring at the end of the lawn. It was a rimy October morning, and the sun rising slowly above the shadowy aspens in the graveyard, shone dimly through the transparent silver veil that hung over the landscape. The leaves, still russet and veined with purple on the boughs overhead, lay in brown wind-rifts along the drive, where they had been blown during the night before the changeful weather had settled into a frosty stillness at daybreak.

"By Jove, it's these confounded acorns that keep me awake," thought Gay, with a nervous irritation which was characteristic of him when he had been disturbed. "A dozen ghosts couldn't have managed to make themselves more of a nuisance."

Being an emotional person in a spasmodic and egotistical fashion, he found himself thinking presently of Janet Merryweather, as he had thought more than once during the wakeful hours of the night. He felt, somehow, that she had been treated detestably, and he was angry with his uncle for having left him, as he described it, "in such a deuce of a hole." "One can't acknowledge the girl, I suppose, though, for the matter of that those tell-tale eyes of hers are not only an acknowledgment, but a condemnation."

With a low whistle, he brought his gun quickly down from his shoulder as a partridge, rising with a gentle whir from the red-topped orchard grass in front of him, skimmed lightly into the golden pathway the sun made through the mist. At the same instant a shot rang out close beside him, and the bird dropped at his feet while Archie Revercomb sauntered slowly across the pasture. A string of partridges and several rabbits hung from his shoulder, and at his heels a pack of fox-hounds followed with muzzles held close to the moist ground.

For a minute Gay's angry astonishment kept him rooted to the spot. Accustomed to the rigid game laws of England, and ignorant of the habits of the country into which he had come, he saw in the act, not the ancient Virginian acceptance of the bird as the right of the hunter, but a lawless infringement of his newly acquired sense of possession.

"You confounded rogue!" he exclaimed hotly, "so you're not only shooting my partridges, but you're actually shooting them before my eyes."

"What's that?" asked Archie, only half understanding the words, "were you after that bird yourself, then?"

"Well, rather, my friend, and I'll trouble you at the same time to hand over that string on your shoulder."

"Hand them over? Well, I like that! Why, I shot them."

"But you shot them on my land, didn't you?"

"What in the devil do you mean by that? My folks have shot over these fields before yours were ever heard of about here. A bird doesn't happen to be yours, I reckon, just because it takes a notion to fly over your pasture."

"Do you mean to tell me that you don't respect a man's right to his game?"

"A man's game is the bird in the bag, not in the air, I reckon. This land was open hunting in the time of the Jordans, and we're not going to keep off of it at the first bid of any Tom-fool that thinks he's got a better right to it."

The assumption of justice angered Gay far more than the original poaching had done. To be flouted in his own pasture on the subject of his own game by a handsome barbarian, whom he had caught red-handed in the act of stealing, would have appealed irresistibly to his sense of humour, if it had not enraged him.

"All the same I give you fair warning," he retorted, "that the next time I find you trespassing on my land, I'll have the law after you."

"The law — bosh! Do you think I'm afraid of it?"

Somewhere at the back of Gay's brain, a curtain was drawn, and he saw as clearly as if it were painted in water colour, an English landscape and a poacher, who had been caught with a stolen rabbit, humbly pulling the scant locks on his forehead. Well, this was one of the joys of democracy, doubtless, and he was in for the rest of them. These people had got the upper hand certainly, as Aunt Kesiah had complained.

"If you think I'll tamely submit to open robbery by such insolent rascals as you, you're mistaken, young man," he returned.

The next instant he sprang aside and knocked up Archie's gun, which had been levelled at him. The boy's face was white under his sunburn, and the feathers on the partridges that hung from his shoulder trembled as though a strong wind were blowing.

"Rascal, indeed!" he stammered, and spat on the ground after his words in the effort to get rid of the taste of them, "as if the whole county doesn't know that you're another blackguard like your uncle before you. Ask any decent woman in the neighbourhood if she would have been seen in his company!"

His rage choked him suddenly, and before he could speak again the other struck him full in the mouth.

"Take that and hold your tongue, you young savage!" said Gay, breathing hard as he drew back his arm.

Then as he stooped for his gun, which he had laid down, a shot passed over his head and whizzed lightly across the meadow.

"The next time I'll take better aim!" called Archie, turning away. "I'll shoot as straight as the man who gave your uncle his deserts down at Poplar Spring!"

Whistling to his dogs, he ran on for a short distance; then vaulting the rail fence, he disappeared into the tangle of willows beside the stream which flowed down from the mill.

While he watched him the anger in Gay's face faded slowly into disgust.

"Now I've stirred up a hornet's nest," he thought, annoyed by his impetuosity. "Who, I wonder, was the fellow, and what a fool — what a tremendous fool I have been!"

With his love of ease, of comfort, of popularity, the situation appeared to him to be almost intolerable.

The whole swarm would be at his head now, he supposed; for instead of silencing the angry buzzing around his uncle's memory, he had probably raised a tumult which would deafen his own ears before it was over. Here, as in other hours and scenes, his resolve had acted less as a restraint than as a spur which had impelled him to the opposite extreme of conduct.

Still rebuking his impulsiveness, he shouldered his gun again, and followed slowly in the direction Archie had taken. The half bared willows by the brook distilled sparkling drops as the small red sun rose higher over the meadows, and it was against the shimmering background of foliage, that the figure of Blossom Revercomb appeared suddenly out of the mist. Her scant skirts were lifted from the cobwebs on the grass, and her mouth was parted while she called softly after a cow that had strayed down to the willows.

"You, sir!" she exclaimed, and blushed enchantingly under the pearly dew that covered her face. "One of our cows broke pasture in the night and we think she must have crossed the creek and got over on your side of the meadow. She's a wonderful jumper. We'll have to be hobbling her soon, I reckon."

"Do you milk?" he asked, charmed by the mental picture of so noble a dairymaid.

"Except when grandma is well enough. You can't leave it to the darkies because they are such terrible slatterns. Put a cow in their hands and she's sure to go dry before three months are over."

She looked up at him, while the little brown mole played hide and seek with a dimple.

"Have you ever been told that you are beautiful, Miss Keren-happuch?" he inquired with a laugh.

Her pale eyes, like frosted periwinkles, dropped softly beneath his gaze.

"How can you think so, sir, when you have seen so many city ladies?"

"I've seen many, but not one so lovely as you are this morning with the frost on your cheeks."

"I'm not dressed. I just slip on any old thing to go milking."

"It's not the dress, that doesn't matter — though I can imagine you in trailing purple velvet with a trimming of sable."

An illumination shone in her face, as if her soul had suddenly blossomed.

"Purple velvet, and what else did you say, sir?" she questioned.

"Sable — fur, you know, the richest, softest, queenliest fur there is."

"I'd like to see it," she rejoined.

"Well, it couldn't improve you! — remember always that the fewer fine clothes you have on the better. Tell me, Blossom," he added, touching her shoulder, "have you many lovers?"

She shook her head. "There are so few about here that any woman would look at."

"I've been told that there's an engaging young rector."

"Mr. Mullen — well, so he is — and he preaches the most beautiful sermons. But he fancies Molly Merryweather, they say, like all the others, though he won't be likely to marry anybody from around here, I suppose."

Her drawling Southern tongue lent a charm, he felt, to her naïve disclosures.

"Like all the others?" he repeated smiling. "Do you mean to tell me that Reuben's piquant little granddaughter is a greater belle in the neighbourhood than you are?"

"She has a way with them," said Blossom sweetly. "I don't know what it is and I am sure she is a good, kind girl — but I sometimes think men like her because she is so contrary. My Uncle Abel has almost lost his head about her, yet she plays fast and loose with him in the cruelest fashion."

"Oh, well, she'll burn her fingers some day, at her own fire, and then she'll be sorry."

"I don't want her to be sorry, but I do wish she'd try just a little to be kind — one day she promises to marry Abel and the next you'd think she'd taken a liking to Jim Halloween."

"Perhaps she has a secret sentiment for the rector?" he suggested, to pique her.

"But I don't believe he will marry anybody around here," she insisted, while the colour flooded her face.

The discovery that she had once cherished — that she still cherished, perhaps, a regard for the young clergyman, added a zest to the adventure, while it freed his passion from the single restraint of which he had been aware. It was not in his nature to encourage a chivalrous desire to protect a woman who had betrayed, however innocently, a sentiment for another man. When the Reverend Mr. Mullen inadvertently introduced an emotional triangle, he had changed the situation from one of mere sentimental dalliance into direct pursuit. By some law of reflex action, known only to the male mind at such instants, the first sign that she was not to be won threw him into the mental attitude of the chase.

"Are the fascinations of your Mr. Mullen confined to the pulpit?" he inquired after a moment, "or does he wear them for the benefit of the heterodox when he walks abroad?"

"Oh, he's not my Mr. Mullen, sir," she hastened to explain though her words trailed off into a sound that was suspiciously like a sigh.

"Molly Merryweather's Mr. Mullen, then?"

"I don't think he cares for Molly — not in that way."

"Are you quite as sure that Molly doesn't care for him in that way?"

"She couldn't or she wouldn't be so cruel. Then she never goes to lectures or Bible classes or mission societies. She is the only girl in the congregation who never makes him anything to wear. Don't you think," she asked anxiously, "that if she really cared about him she would have done some of these things?"

"From my observation of ladies and clergymen," replied Gay seriously, "I should think that she would most likely have done all of them."

She appeared relieved, he thought, by the warmth of his protestation. Actually Mr. Mullen had contributed a decided piquancy to the episode.

"I'm afraid, Blossom," he said after a moment, "that I am beginning to be a little jealous of the Reverend Mullen. By the way, what is the Christian name of the paragon?"

"Orlando, sir."

"Ye Gods! The horror grows! Describe him to me, but paint him mildly if you wish me to survive it."

For a minute she thought very hard, as though patiently striving to invoke a mental image.

"He's a little taller than you, but not quite — not quite so broad."

"Thank you, you *have* put it mildly."

"He has the most beautiful curly hair — real chestnut — that grows in two peaks high on his forehead. His eyes are grey and his mouth is small, with the most perfect teeth. He doesn't wear any moustache, you see, to hide them, and they flash a great deal when he preaches —— "

"Hold on!"

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"I mean that I am overcome. I am mentally prostrated before such perfections. Blossom, you are in love with him."

"Oh, no, sir; but I do like to watch him in the pulpit. He gesticulates so beautifully."

"And now — speak truth and spare not — how do I compare with him?"

"Oh, Mr. Jonathan, you are so different!"

"Do you imply that I am ugly, Blossom?"

"Why, no — not ugly. Indeed I didn't mean that."

"But I'm not so handsome as the Reverend Orlando? — now, confess it."

She blushed, and he thought her confusion the most charming he had ever seen.

"Well, perhaps you aren't quite so — so handsome; but there's something about you, sir," she added eagerly, "that reminds me of him."

"By Jove! You don't mean it!"

"I can't tell just what it is, but it is something. You both look as though you'd lived in a city and had learned to wear your Sunday clothes without remembering that they are your Sunday clothes. Of course, your hair doesn't curl like his," she added honestly, "and I doubt if you'd look nearly so well in the pulpit."

"I'm very sure I shouldn't, but Blossom ——"

"What, Mr. Jonathan?"

"Do you think you will ever like me as well as you like Mr. Mullen?"

His gay and intimate smile awaited her answer, and in the pause, he stretched out his hand and laid it on her large round arm a little above the elbow. The flush deepened in her face, and he felt a slight trembling under his fingers like the breast of a frightened bird.

"Blossom," he repeated, half mocking, half tender, "do you think you will ever like me better than you like Mr. Mullen?"

At this her rustic pride came suddenly between them, and withdrawing her arm from his clasp, she stepped out of the bridle path into the wet orchard grass that surrounded them.

"I've known him so much longer," she replied.

"And if you know me longer will you like me better, Blossom?"

Then as she still drew back, he pressed nearer, and spoke her name again in a whisper.

"Blossom — Blossom, are you afraid of me? Do you think I would hurt you?"

The gentleness in his voice stayed her flight for an instant, and in that instant, as she looked up at him, he stooped quickly and kissed her mouth.

"What a damned ass I've made of myself," he thought savagely, when she broke from him and fled over the mill brook into the Revercombs' pasture beyond. She did not look back, but sped as straight as a frightened hare to the covert; and by this brilliant, though unconscious coquetry, she had wrested the victory from him at the moment when it had appeared to fall too easily into his hands.

"Well, it's all right now. I'll take better care in the future," he thought, his self-reproach extinguished by the assurance that, after all, he had done nothing that justified the intrusion of his conscience. "By Jove, she's a beauty — but she's not my kind all the same," he added as he strolled leisurely homeward — for like many persons whose moral standard exceeds immeasurably their ordinary rule of conduct, he cherished somewhere in an obscure corner of his brain an image of perfection closely related to the type which he found least alluring in reality. Humanly tolerant of those masculine weaknesses he shared, he had erected mentally a pinnacle of virtue upon which he exacted that a frailer being should maintain an equilibrium. A pretty woman, it was true, might go at a merry pace provided she was not related to him, but he required that both his mother and his aunt should be above suspicion. In earlier days he had had several affairs of sentiment with ladies to whom he declined to bow if he happened to be walking with a member of his family; and this fine discrimination was characteristic of him, for it proved that he was capable of losing his heart in a direction where he would refuse to lift his hat.

At the late breakfast to which he returned, he found Mr. Chamberlayne, who had ridden over from Applegate to consult with Kesiah. In appearance the lawyer belonged to what is called "the old school," and his manner produced an effect of ostentation which was foreign to his character as a Christian and a gentleman. His eyebrows, which were still dark and thick, hung prominently over his small, sparkling eyes behind gold rimmed spectacles, while a lock of silver hair was brushed across his forehead with the romantic wave which was fashionable in the period when Lord Byron was the favourite poet. Kindness and something more — something that was almost a touching innocence, looked from his face. "It is a good world — I've always found it to be a good world, and if I've ever heard anything against it, I've refused to believe it," his look seemed to say.

All through breakfast he rambled on after his amiable habit — praising the food, praising the flowers, praising the country, praising the universe. The only creature or object he omitted to praise was Kesiah — for in his heart he regarded it as an outrage on the part of Providence that a woman should have been created quite so ugly. While he talked he kept his eyes turned away from her, gazing abstractedly through the window or at a portrait of Mrs. Gay, painted in the first year of her marriage, which hung over the sideboard. In the mental world which he inhabited all women were fair and fragile and endowed with a quality which he was accustomed to describe as "solace." When occasionally, as in the case of Kesiah, one was thrust upon his notice, to whom by no stretch of the imagination these graces could be attributed, he disposed of the situation by the simple device of gazing above her head. In his long and intimate acquaintance, he had never looked Kesiah in the face, and he never intended to. He was perfectly aware that if he were for an instant to forget himself so far as to contemplate her features, he should immediately lose all patience with her. No woman, he felt, had the right to affront so openly a man's ideal of what the sex should be. When he spoke of her behind her back it was with indignant sympathy as "poor Miss Kesiah," or "that poor good soul Kesiah Blount" — for in spite of a natural bent for logic, and more than forty years of sedulous attendance upon the law, he harboured at the bottom of his heart an unreasonable conviction that Kesiah's plainness was, somehow, the result of her not having chosen to be pretty.

"Any sport, Jonathan?" he inquired cheerfully, while he buttered his waffles. "If I scared up one Molly Cotton-tail out of the briars I did at least fifty."

"No, I didn't get a shot," replied Gay, "but I met a poacher on my land who appeared to have been more successful. There seems to be absolutely no respect for a man's property rights in this part of the country. The fellow actually had the impudence to stop and bandy words with me."

"Well, you mustn't be too hard on him. His ancestors, doubtless, shot over your fields for generations, and he'd probably look upon an attempt to enforce the game laws as an infringement of his privileges."

"Do you mean that the landowner is utterly unprotected?"

"By no means — go slow — go slow — you might search the round globe, I believe for a more honest or a more peaceable set of neighbours. But they've always been taught, you see, to regard the bird in the air as belonging to the man with the gun. On these large estates game was so plentiful in the old days and pot-hunters, as they call them, so few, that it didn't pay a man to watch out for his interest. Now that the birds are getting scarce, the majority of farmers in the State are having their lands posted, but your uncle was too little of a sportsman to concern himself in the matter."

"Well, I knocked a tooth out of the fellow, so the whole county will be after me like a pack of hounds, I suppose. I wonder who he was, by the way — young, good looking, rather a bully?"

"The description fits a Revercomb. As they are your next neighbours it was probably the miller or his brother."

"I know the miller, and it wasn't he — but when I come to think of it, the youngster had that same rustic look to him. By Jove, I am sorry it was a Revercomb," he added under his breath.

A frown had settled on the face of the old gentleman, and he poured the syrup over his buckwheat cakes with the manner of a man who is about to argue a case for the defence when his natural sympathies are with the prosecution.

"They are an irascible family from the mother down," he observed, "and I'm sorry you've got into trouble with them so soon for the miller is probably the most popular man in the county." He paused, cleared his throat, and after a tentative glance at Kesiah, which fell short of her bosom, decided to leave the sentence in his mind unspoken while they remained in her presence.

A little later, when the two men were smoking in the library, Gay brought the conversation back again to the point at which the lawyer had so hastily dropped it.

"Am I likely, then, to have trouble with the Revercombs?" he asked, with a disturbing memory of Blossom's flaxen head under the hooded shawl.

"It's not improbable that the family will take up the matter. These country folk are fearful partisans, you see. However, it may lead to nothing worse than the miller's refusing to grind your corn or forbidding you to use the bridle path over his pasture."

"Had my uncle any friction in that quarter when he lived here?"

Mr. Chamberlayne's cigar had gone out while he talked, and striking a match on a little silver box, he watched the thin blue flame abstractedly an instant before he answered.

"Were you ever told," he inquired, "that there was some talk of arresting Abner Revercomb before the coroner's jury agreed on a verdict?"

"Abner? He's the eldest of the brothers, isn't he? No, I hadn't heard of it."

"It was only the man's reputation for uprightness, I believe, that prevented the arrest. The Revercombs are a remarkable family for their station in life, and they derive their ability entirely from their mother, who was one of the Hawtreys. They belong to the new order — to the order that is rapidly forging to the surface and pushing us dilapidated aristocrats out of the way. These people have learned a lot in the last few years, and they are learning most of all that the accumulation of wealth is the real secret of dominance. When they get control of the money, they'll begin to strive after culture, and acquire a smattering of education instead. It's astonishing, perhaps, but the fact remains that a reputable, hard-working farmer like our friend the miller, with his primitive little last century grist-mill, has probably greater influence in the State to-day than you have, for all your two thousand acres. He has intelligence enough to go to the legislature and make a fair showing, if he wants to, and I don't believe that either of us could stand in the race a minute against him."

"Well, he's welcome to the doubtful honour! But the thing that puzzles me is why in thunder his brother Abner should have wanted to shoot my uncle?"

"It seems—" the lawyer hesitated, coughed and glanced nervously at the door as if he feared the intrusion of Kesiah — "it seems he was a lover — was engaged in fact to Janet Merryweather before — before she attracted your uncle's attention. Later the engagement was broken, and he married a cousin in a fit of temper, it was said at the time. There was always ill blood after this, it appeared, and on the morning of your uncle's death Abner was seen crossing the pasture from Poplar Spring with his gun on his shoulder."

"It's an ugly story all round," remarked Gay quietly, "and I wish to heaven that I were out of it. How has my poor mother stood it?"

"She has known very little about it," Mr. Chamberlayne answered, while his jutting eyebrows twitched nervously as he turned away. "Your mother, my dear boy, is one of those particularly angelic characters from whose presence even the thought of evil is banished. You have only to look into her face to discern how pure and spotless she has kept her soul. My old friend Jonathan was very devoted to her. She represented, indeed, the spiritual influence in his life, and there was no one on earth whose respect or affection he valued so highly. It was his consideration for her alone that prevented him from making a most unfortunate marriage."

"The girl died insane, didn't she?"

"It was a distressing — a most distressing case; but we must remember, in rendering our verdict, that if Janet Merryweather had upheld the principles of her sex, it would never have happened."

"We'll rest it there, then — but what of her daughter? The child could hardly have been accessory before the fact, I suppose?"

An expression of suffering patience came into the old gentleman's face, and he averted his gaze as he had done before the looming countenance of Kesiah.

"Your uncle rarely spoke to me of her," he answered, "but I have reason to know that her existence was a constant source of distress to him. He was most anxious both to protect your mother and to provide generously for the future of Janet's daughter."

"Yet I understand that there was no mention of her in his will."

"This omission was entirely on your mother's account. The considerable property — representing a third of his entire estate — which was left in trust to me for a secret purpose, will go, of course, to the girl. In the last ten years this property has practically doubled in value, and Molly will take possession of the income from it when she reaches her twenty-first birthday. The one condition is that at Reuben's death she shall live with your aunt."

"Ah," said Jonathan, "I begin to see."

"At the time, of course, he believed that your mother would survive him only a few months, and his efforts to shield her from any painful discoveries extended even after his death. His wish was that the girl should be well educated and prepared for any change in her circumstances — but unfortunately she has proved to be rather a wilful young person, and it has been impossible entirely to fulfil his intentions with regard to her. Ah, he wasn't wise always, poor Jonathan, but I never doubted that he meant well at bottom, however things may have appeared. His anxiety in the case of your mother was very beautiful, and if his plans seem to have miscarried, we must lay the blame after all, on the quality of his judgment, not of his heart."

"And the girl will be twenty-one next April, I am told?"

"Her birthday is the seventeenth, exactly ten years from the date of Jonathan's death."

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWS TWO SIDES OF A QUARREL

At dusk that evening the miller, who had spent the day in Applegate, stopped at Bottom's Ordinary on his way home, and received a garbled account of the quarrel from the farmers gathered about the hospitable hearth in the public room. The genius of personality had enabled Betsey Bottom to hold open doors to the traveller long after the wayside tavern in Virginia had passed from the road and the one certain fact relating to the chance comer was that he never came. By combining a store with a public house, she managed still to defy the progress of time as well as the absence of guests. "Thank the Lord, I've never been one to give in to changes!" it was her habit to exclaim.

The room was full of tobacco smoke when Abel entered, and as he paused, in order to distinguish the row of silhouettes nodding against the ruddy square of the fireplace, Adam Doolittle's quavering voice floated to him from a seat in the warmest corner. The old man was now turning ninety, and he had had, on the whole, a fortunate life, though he would have indignantly repudiated the idea. He was a fair type of the rustic of the past generation — slow of movement, keen of wit, racy of speech.

"What's this here tale about Mr. Jonathan knockin' Archie down an' settin' on him, Abel?" he inquired. "Ain't you got yo' hand in yet, seein' as you've been spilin' for a fight for the last fortnight?"

"I hadn't heard of it," replied Abel, his face flushing. "What in hell did he knock Archie down for?"

"Jest for shootin' a few birds — for nothin' on earth but shootin' a few birds that might as well have been flying' about on yo' land as on his, if thar minds had been set over toward you."

"Do you mean that Mr. Jonathan got into a quarrel with him for hunting on his land? Why, we shot over those fields for a hundred years before the first damned Gay ever came here."

"So we have — so we have, but it seems we ain't a-goin' to do so any longer if Mr. Jonathan can find a way to prevent it. Archie was down here jest a minute or two arter you went by this mornin', an' he was swearin' like thunder, with a busted lip an' a black eye."

A smarting sensation passed over Abel, as though the change to the warm room after the cold outside were stinging his flesh.

"Well, I wish I had been there," he retorted, "somebody else would have been knocked down and sat on if that had happened."

"Ah, so I said — so I said," chuckled old Adam. "Thar ain't many men with sech a hearty stomach for trouble, I was jest sayin' to Solomon."

Bending over the fire, he lifted a live ember between two small sticks, and placing it in the callous palm of his hand, blew softly on it an instant before he lighted his pipe.

"What goes against my way of thinkin'," remarked

Betsey Bottom, wiping a glass of cider on her checked apron before she handed it to Abel, "is that so peaceable lookin' a gentleman as Mr. Jonathan should begin to start a fuss jest as soon as he lands in the midst of us. Them plump, soft-eyed males is generally inclined to mildness whether they be men or cattle."

"'Taint nothin' on earth but those foreign whims he's brought back an' is tryin' to set workin' down here," said Solomon Hatch. "If we don't get our backs up agin 'em in time, we'll find presently we don't even dare to walk straight along the turnpike when we see him comin'. A few birds, indeed! — did anybody ever hear tell of sech doin's? 'Warn't them birds in the air?' I ax, 'an' don't the air belong to Archie the same as to him?'"

"It's because he's rich an' we're po', that he's got a right to lay claim to it," muttered William Ming, a weakly obstinate person, to whose character a glass of cider contributed the only strength.

"You'd better hold yo' tongue, suh," retorted his wife, "it ain't yo' air anyway, is it?"

"I reckon it's as much mine as it's Mr. Jonathan's," rejoined William, who, having taken a double portion, had waxed argumentative. "An' what I reason is that birds as is in the air ain't anybody's except the man's that can bring 'em down with a gun."

"That's mo' than you could do," replied his wife, "an' be that whether or no, it's time you were thinkin' about beddin' the grey mule, an' she ain't in the air, anyhow. If I was you, Abel," she continued in a softer tone, "I wouldn't let 'em make me so riled about Mr. Jonathan till I'd looked deep in the matter. It may be that he ain't acquainted with the custom of the neighbourhood, an' was actin' arter some foolish foreign laws he was used to."

"I'll give him warning all the same," said Abel savagely, "that if I ever catch him on my land I'll serve him in the fashion that he served Archie."

"You don't lose nothin' by goin' slow," returned Solomon. "Old Adam there is a born fire eater, too, but he knows how to set back when thar's trouble brewin'."

"I ain't never set back mo' than was respectable in a man of ninety," croaked old Adam indignantly, while he prodded the ashes in his corncob pipe with his stubby forefinger. "'Tis my j'ints, not my sperits that have grown feeble."

"Oh, we all know that you were a gay dog an' a warnin' to the righteous when you were young," rejoined Solomon, in an apologetic manner, "an' it must be a deal of satisfaction to be able to look back on a sinful past when you've grown old and repented. I've been a pious, God-fearing soul from my birth, as you all know, friends, but sad to relate, I ain't found the solid comfort in a life of virtue that I'd hoped for, an' that's the truth."

"The trouble with it, Solomon," replied old Adam, pushing a log back on the andirons with his rough, thick soled boot to which shreds of manure were clinging, "the trouble with it is that good or bad porridge, it all leaves the same taste in the mouth arter you've once swallowed it. I've had my pleasant trespasses in the past, but when I look backward on 'em now, to save my life, I can't remember anything about 'em but some small painful mishap that al'ays went along with 'em an' sp'iled the pleasure. Thar was the evening I dressed up in my best clothes an' ran off to Applegate to take a yellow haired circus lady, in pink skirts, out to supper. It ought to have been a fine, glorious bit of wickedness to remember, but the truth was that I'd put on a new pair of boots, an' one of 'em pinched so in the toes that I couldn't think of another thing the whole blessed evening. 'Tis al'ays that way in my experience of life — when you glance back or glance befo' 'tis pleasant enough to the eye, but at the moment while you're livin' it thar's al'ays the damn shoe that pinches."

"Ah, you're right, you're right, Mr. Doolittle," remarked William Ming, who had lingered in the doorway to follow the conversation.

"It's life, that's what it is," commented Solomon, heaving a sigh that burst a button hole in his blue shirt. "An' what's mo' than life, it's marriage. When I see the way some men wear themselves out with wantin' little specks of women, I say to myself over an' over agin, 'Ah, if they only knew that thar ain't nothin' in it except the wantin.'"

"Not another thing — not another blessed mite of a thing," agreed William, who had imbibed secretly again behind the back of his wife.

"I've known a man to throw himself into the river from sheer love befo' marriage," said Solomon, "an' two weeks arter the woman had taken him, to fall out with her because she'd put too much shortenin' in his pie-crust."

"It's all love befo' marriage an' all shortenin' arterwards," observed Betsey Bottom, with scorn. "I've al'ays noticed in this world that the less men folks have to say for themselves the better case they make of it. When they've spent all thar time sence Adam tryin' to throw dust in the eyes of women, it would be better manners if they'd stop twittin' 'em because they'd succeeded."

"True, true, you never spoke a truer word, ma'am, in my acquaintance with you," responded Solomon, with what hasty gallantry he could summon. "I was thinkin' them very things to myself when you mentioned 'em. Not that anybody could throw dust in yo' eyes, even if he tried to."

"Well, it would take mo'n a man to do that, I reckon," she replied, amiably enough, "I saw through 'em early, an' when you've once seen through 'em it's surprisin' how soon the foolishness of men begins to look like any other foolishness on earth."

She was listened to with respectful and flattering attention by her guests, who leaned forward with pipes in hand and vacant, admiring eyes on her still comely features. It was a matter of gossip that she had refused half the county, and that her reason for marrying William had been that he wasn't "set," and would be easy to manage. The event had proved the prophecy, and to all appearance it was a perfectly successful mating.

Abel was the first to move under her gaze, and rising from his chair by the fire, he took up his hat, and made his way slowly through the group, which parted grudgingly, and closed quickly together.

"Take a night to sleep on yo' temper, Abel," called Solomon after him, "and git a good breakfast inside of you befo' you start out to do anything rash. Well, I must be gittin' along, folks, sad as it seems to me. It's strange to think, now ain't it — that when Nannie was married to Tom Middlesex an' livin' six miles over yonder at Piping Tree, I couldn't have got over that road too fast on my way to her."

"You'd still feel like that, friend, if she were still married to Tom Middlesex," quavered old Adam. "'Tis the woman we oughtn't to think on that draws us with a hair."

"Now that's a case in p'int," replied Solomon, nodding after the vanishing figure of Abel. "All his wits are in his eyes, as you can tell jest to look at him — an for sech a little hop-o'-my-thumb female that don't reach nigh up to his shoulder."

"I can't see any particular good looks in the gal, myself," remarked Mrs. Bottom, "but then, when it's b'iled down to the p'int, it ain't her, but his own wishes he's chasin'."

"Did you mark the way she veered from him to Mr. Jonathan the other day?" inquired William Ming, "she's the sort that would flirt with a scarecrow if thar warn't anything else goin'."

"The truth is that her eyes are bigger than her morals, an' I said it the first time I ever seed her," rejoined old Adam. "My taste, even when I was young, never ran to women that was mo' eyes than figger."

Still discoursing, they stumbled out into the dusk, through which Abel's large figure loomed ahead of them.

"A man that's born to trouble, an' that of the fightin' kind — as the sparks fly upward," added the elder.

As the miller drove out of the wood, the rustle of the leaves under his wheels changed from the soft murmurs in the moist hollows to the crisp crackle in the open places. In the west Venus hung silver white over the new moon, and below the star and the crescent a single pine tree stood as clearly defined as if it were pasted on a grey background of sky.

Half a mile farther on, where his road narrowed abruptly, a voice hallooed to him as he approached, and driving nearer he discerned dimly a man's figure standing beside a horse that had gone lame.

"Halloo, there? Have you a light? My horse has got a stone or cast a shoe, I can't make out which it is."

Reaching for the lantern under his seat, Abel alighted, and after calling "Whoa!" to his mare, walked a few steps forward to the stationary horse and rider in the dusk ahead. As the light shone on the man and he recognized Jonathan Gay, he hesitated an instant, as though uncertain whether to advance or retreat.

"If I'd known 'twas you," he observed gruffly, "I shouldn't have been so quick about getting down out of my gig."

"Thank you, all the same," replied Gay in his pleasant voice. "It doesn't seem to be a stone, after all," he added. "I'm rather afraid he got a sprain when he stumbled into a hole a yard or two back."

Kneeling in the road, Abel lifted the horse's foot, and felt for the injury with a practised hand.

"Needs a bandage," he said at last curtly. "I happen to have a bottle of liniment in the gig."

The light glided like a winged insect over the strip of corduroy road, and a minute later the pungent odour of the liniment floated to Gay's nostrils.

"Give me anything you have for a compress," remarked the miller, dropping again on his knees. "Pick a few of those Jimson weeds by the fence and lend me your handkerchief — or a couple of them would be still better. There, now, that's the best I can do," he added after a moment. "Lead him slowly and be sure to look where you're going."

"I will, thank you — but can you find your way without the lantern?"

"Hannah can travel the road in the dark and so can I for that matter. You needn't thank me, by the way. I wouldn't have troubled about you, but I've a liking for horses."

"A jolly good thing it was for me that you came up at the instant. I say, Revercomb, I'm sorry it was your brother I got into a row with this morning."

"Oh, that's another score. We haven't settled it yet," retorted the miller, as he stepped into his gig. "You've warned us off your land, so I'll trouble you to keep to the turnpike and avoid the bridle path that crosses my pasture."

Before Gay could reply, the other had whistled to his mare and was spinning over the flat road into the star-spangled distance.

When the miller reached home and entered the kitchen, his mother's first words related to the plight of Archie, who sat sullenly nursing his bruised mouth in one corner.

"If you've got any of the Hawtrey blood in yo' veins you'll take sides with the po' boy," she said. "Thar's Abner settin' over thar so everlastin' mealy mouthed that he won't say nothin' mo' to the p'int than that he knew all the time it would happen."

"Well, that's enough, ain't it?" growled Abner; "I did know it would happen sure enough from the outset."

"Thar ain't any rousin' him," observed Sarah, with scorn. "I declar, I believe pa over thar has got mo' sperit in him even if he does live mostly on cornmeal mush."

"Plenty of sperit in me — plenty of sperit," chirped grandfather, alert as an aged sparrow that still contrives to hop stiffly in the sunshine.

"Oh, yes, he's sperit left in him, though he's three years older than I am," remarked grandmother, with bitterness. "*He* ain't wo' out with work and with child bearin' befo' he was ninety. *He* ain't bald, *he* ain't toothless," she concluded passionately, as if each of grandfather's blessings were an additional insult to her. "He can still eat hard food when he wants it."

"For pity's sake, be quiet, ma, "commanded Sarah sternly, at which the old woman broke into sobs.

"Yes, I must be quiet, but *he* can still talk," she moaned.

"Tell me about it, Archie," said Abel, drawing off his overcoat and sitting down to his supper. "I passed Jonathan Gay in the road and he asked me to bind up his horse's sprain."

"He'd be damned befo' I'd bind up a sprain for him!" burst out Archie, with violence. "Met me with a string of partridges this morning and jumped on me, blast him, as if he'd caught me in the act of stealing. I'd like to know if we hadn't hunted on that land before he or his rotten old uncle were ever thought of?"

"Ah, those were merry days, those were!" piped grandfather. "Used to go huntin' myself when I was young, with Mr. Jordan, an' brought home any day as many fine birds as I could carry. Trained his dogs for him, too."

"Thar was al'ays time for him to go huntin'," whimpered grandmother.

"What are you goin' to do about it, Abel?" asked Sarah, turning upon him with the smoking skillet held out in her hand.

At the question Blossom Revercomb, who was seated at work under the lamp, raised her head and waited with an anxious, expectant look for the answer. She was embroidering a pair of velvet slippers for Mr. Mullen — a task begun with passion and now ending in weariness. While she listened for Abel's response, her long embroidery needle remained suspended over the toe of the slipper, where it gleamed in the lamp light.

"I don't know," replied Abel, and Blossom drew a repressed sigh of relief; "I've just ordered him to keep clear of our land, if that's what you're hintin' at."

"If you had the sperit of yo' grandpa you'd have knocked him down in the road," said Sarah angrily.

"Yes, yes, I'd have knocked him down in the road," chimed in the old man, with the eagerness of a child.

"You can't knock a man down when he asks to borrow your lantern," returned Abel, doggedly, on the defensive.

"Oh, you can't, can't you?" jeered Sarah. "All you're good for, I reckon, is to shuck corn or peel potatoes!"

For a minute Abel stared at her in silence. "I declare, mother, I don't believe you're any better than a heathen," he remarked sadly at last.

"Well, I'm not the kind of Christian you are, anyway," retorted Sarah, "I'd like to know whar you'll find anything in Scripture about not knockin' a man down because he asks you for a lantern. I thought I knew my Bible — but I reckon you are better acquainted with it — you an' yo' Mr. Mullen."

"Of course, you know your Bible. I wasn't meanin' that."

"Then if readin' yo' Bible ain't bein' a Christian, I suppose it's havin' curly hair, an' gittin' up in the pulpit an' mincin'. Who are those slippers for, Keren-happuch?"

"Mr. Mullen, grandma."

"Well, if I was goin' to embroider slippers for a minister," taunted Sarah, "I'd take care to choose one that could repeat his Scripture when he was called on."

"Ah, 'tis the age, not the man," lamented grandfather, "'tis an age of small larnin' an' weak-kneed an' mealy mouthed into the bargain. Why, they're actually afeared to handle hell-fire in the pulpit any longer, an' the texts they spout are that tame an' tasteless that 'tis like dosin' you with flaxseed tea when you're needin' tar-water. 'Twas different when I was young an' in my vigour," he went on eagerly, undisturbed by the fact that nobody paid the slightest attention to what he was saying, "for sech was the power and logic of Parson Claymore's sermons that he could convict you of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost even when you hadn't committed it. A mo' blameless soul never lived than my father, yet I remember one Sunday when parson fixed his eye upon him an' rolled out his stirrin' text 'Thou art the man,' he was so taken by surprise an' suddenness that he just nodded back at the pulpit an' answered, 'Yes, parson, I am, if you'll excuse me.'"

"It's a pity thar ain't mo' like Parson Claymore now," remarked Sarah, who had stopped to listen to the concluding words of the anecdote. "Thar ain't vim enough in this generation of preachers to skeer a rabbit."

Her profile, with its sparse wave of hair from the forehead, was repeated in grotesque exaggeration on the wall at her back. The iron will in her lent a certain metallic hardness to her features, and her shadow resembled in outline the head on some ancient coin that had lain buried for centuries. Intrenched behind an impregnable self-esteem, she had never conceded a point, never admitted a failure, never accepted a compromise. "It ain't no wonder that a new comer thinks he can knock you down an' set on you for shootin' a few birds," she added, after a moment.

"He'll find out I ain't done with him yet," growled Archie, and rising from his seat, he took down his gun and began polishing the barrel with an old yarn stocking of Sarah's.

The long needle missed the hole at which Blossom had pointed it, and she looked up with a sullen droop to her mouth.

"I reckon Mr. Gay has just as good a right to his things as we have to ours," she said.

"Right! Who wants his right?" flared Archie, turning upon her. "You'll say next, I reckon, that he had a right to split my upper lip open if he wanted to."

"From the way grandma carries on anybody would think that was what *she* wanted," persisted Blossom, adhering stubbornly to her point, "she sounds as if she were mad because people ain't everlastingly fighting."

"You needn't think I don't see what you're aimin' at, Keren-happuch," rejoined Sarah, who used this name only in moments of anger, "you're tryin' to make me think a grown man can't do anything better than get up in the pulpit an' mouth texts so soft that a babe couldn't cut its teeth on 'em. You've had notions in yo' head about Orlando Mullen ever since he came here, an' you ain't fooled me about 'em."

"Thar, thar, don't you begin pesterin' Blossom," interposed Abner, aroused at last from his apathy.

"Notions about Mr. Mullen!" repeated Blossom, and though there was a hot flush in her face, her tone was almost one of relief.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH MOLLY FLIRTS

ON a November morning several weeks later, when the boughs of trees showed almost bare against the sky, Molly Merryweather walked down to Bottom's store to buy a bottle of cough syrup for Reuben, who had a cold. Over the counter Mrs. Bottom, as she was still called from an hereditary respect for the house rather than for the husband, delivered a good-natured rebuke while she wrapped the bottle in coarse brown paper. The store, which smelt of dry-goods and ginger snaps, was a small square room jutting abruptly out of the bar, from which it derived both its warmth and its dignity.

"Even men folks have got the sperit of worms and will turn at last," she remarked in her cheerful voice, which sounded as if it issued from the feather bed she vaguely resembled.

"Let them turn — I can do without them very well," replied Molly, tossing her head.

"Ah, you're young yet, my dear, an' thar's a long road ahead of you. But wait till you've turned forty an' you'll find that the man you throwed over at twenty will come handy, if for nothin' mo' than to fill a gap in the chimney. I ain't standin' up for 'em, mind you, an' I can't remember that I ever heard anything particular to thar credit as a sex — but po' things as we allow 'em to be, thar don't seem but one way to git along without wantin' 'em, an' that is to have 'em. It's sartain sure, however, that they fill a good deal mo' of yo' thought when they ain't around than when they are. Why, look at William, now — the first time he axed me to marry him, I thought to myself, 'you're slue-footed an' slack-kneed an' addle-headed, an' I wouldn't marry you for a million!'— but the last time, twenty years later, I kept sayin' 'you're still slue-footed an' slack-kneed an' addle-headed an' I'll marry you whether or no.' Twenty years may not change a man for the better, but it does a powerful lot toward persuadin' a woman to put up with the worst!"

"Well, best or worst, I've seen enough of marriage, Mrs. Bottom, to know that I shouldn't like it."

"I ain't denyin' it might be improved on without hurtin' it — but a single woman's a terrible lonesome body, Molly."

"I'm not lonely, while I have grandfather."

"He's old an' he ain't got many years ahead of him."

"If I lose him I'll go to Applegate and trim hats for a living."

"It's a shame, Molly, with the po' miller splittin' his heart over you."

"He'll mend it. They're like that, all of them."

"But Mr. Mullen? Ain't he different now, bein' a parson?"

"No, he's just the same, and besides he'd always think he'd stooped to marry me."

"Then take Jim Halloween. With three good able-bodied lovers at yo' beck an' call, it's a downright shame to die an old maid jest from pure contrariness.

It's better arter all, to eat dough that don't rise than to go hungry."

A step sounded on the platform outside and a lank, good-looking countryman glanced cautiously in through the crack in the door. Observing Molly, he spat a wad of tobacco over the hitching rail by the steps, and stopped to smooth his straw-coloured hair with the palm of his hand before crossing the threshold.

"Thar's Jim Halloween now jest as we were speakin' of him," whispered Betsey Bottom, with a nudge at Molly's shoulder.

"Well, if that don't beat all," drawled the young man, in an embarrassed rapture, as he entered. "I was gettin' my horse shod over thar at Tim Mallory's, an' I thought to myself that I'd jest drop over an' say 'howdy' to Mrs. Bottom."

"Oh, I reckon you caught a glimpse of red through the door," chuckled Betsey, who was possessed of the belief that it was her Christian duty to further any match, good or bad, that came under her eye.

"I must be going, so don't hurry your visit," replied Molly, laughing. "Mrs. Hatch has been in bed for a week and I'm on my way to see Judy."

"I'll walk a bit of the road with you if you ain't any serious objection," remarked the lover, preparing to accompany her.

"Oh, no, none in the world," she replied demurely, "you may carry my cough syrup."

"It ain't for yourself, I hope?" he inquired, with a look of alarm.

"No, for grandfather. He caught cold staying in the barn with the red cow."

"Well, I'm glad 'taint for you — I don't like a weak-chested woman."

She looked up smiling as they passed the store into the sunken road which led in the direction of Solomon Hatch's cottage.

"I did see a speck of red through the crack," he confessed after a minute, as if he were unburdening his conscience of a crime.

"You mean you saw my cap or jacket — or maybe my gloves?"

"It was yo' cap, an' so I came in. I hope you have no particular objection?" His face had flushed to a violent crimson and in his throat his Adam's apple worked rapidly up and down between the high points of his collar. "I mean," he stammered presently, "that I wouldn't have gone in if I hadn't seen that bit of red through the do'. I suppose I had better tell you, that I've been thinking a great deal about you in the evening when my day's work is over."

"I'm glad I don't interfere with your farming."

"That would be a pity, wouldn't it? Do you ever think of me, I wonder, at the same time?" he inquired sentimentally.

"I can't tell because I don't know just what that time is, you see."

"Well, along after supper generally — particularly if ma has made buckwheat cakes an' I've eaten a hearty meal an' feel kind of cosy an' comfortable when I set down by the fire an' there's nothin' special to do."

"But you see I don't like buckwheat cakes, and I've always something 'special' to do at that hour."

"Ah, you don't mean it, do you — about not liking buckwheat cakes? As for the rest, bein' a woman, I reckon you would have the washin' up to attend to just at that time. I don't like a woman that sets around idle after supper — an' I'm glad you're one to be brisk an' busy about the house, though I'm sorry you ain't over partial to buckwheat. May I inquire, if you don't object to tellin' me, what is yo' favourite food?"

"It's hard to say — I have so many — bread and jam, I believe."

"I hope you don't think I'm too pressin' on the subject, but ma has always said that there wasn't any better bond for matrimony than the same taste in food. Do you think she's right?"

"I shouldn't wonder. She's had experience anyway."

"Yes, that's jest what I tell her — she's had experience an' she ought to know. Pa and she never had a word durin' the thirty years of their marriage, an' she always said she ruled him not with the tongue, but with the fryin' pan. I don't reckon there's a better cook than ma in this part of the country, do you?"

"I'm quite sure there isn't. She has given up her life to it."

"To be sure she has — every minute of it, like the woman whose price is above rubies that Mr. Mullen is so fond of preachin' about." For a moment he considered the fact as though impressed anew by its importance. "I'm glad you feel that way, because ma has always stuck out that you had the makin' of a mighty fine cook in you."

"Has she? That was nice of her, wasn't it?"

"Well, she wouldn't have said so if she hadn't thought it. It ain't her way to say pleasant things when she can help it. You must judge her by her work not by her talk, pa used to say of her."

"She's the kind that doesn't mind taking trouble for you, I know that about her," replied Molly, gravely.

"You're right about that, an' you're the same way, I am sure. I've watched you pretty closely with your grandfather."

"Yes, I believe I am — with grandfather."

"'Twill be the same way when you marry, I was sayin' as much to ma only yesterday. 'She'd be jest as savin' an' thrifty as you,' I said, 'if she got the right man to marry her' — I mean, of course, if the right man got you to marry him,— but 'tis all the same in the end." Again he paused, cleared his throat, and swallowed convulsively, "I've sometimes felt that I might be the right man, Miss Molly," he said.

"O Mr. Halloween!"

"Why, I thought you knew I felt so from the way you looked at me."

"But I can't help the way I look, can I?"

"Well, I've told you now, so it ain't a secret. I've thought about askin' you for more than a year — ever since you smiled at me one Sunday in church while Mr. Mullen was preachin'."

"Did I? I've quite forgotten it!"

"I suppose you have, seein' you smile so frequent. But that put the idea in my head anyway an' I've cared a terrible lot about marryin' you ever since."

"But I'm not the kind of person, at all. I'm not saving, I'm not thrifty."

"I hope you're wrong — but even if you're not, well, I want you terrible hard jest the same. You see

I can always keep an eye on the expenses," he hastened to add, and made a desperate clutch at her hand.

The red worsted mitten came off in his grasp, and he stood eyeing it ruefully while he waited for her answer.

"I've determined never, never to marry," she replied.

His chest heaved. "I knew you felt that way about the others, but I thought somehow I was different," he rejoined.

"No, it's not the man, but marriage that I don't like," she responded, shaking her head. "It's all work an' no play wherever I've seen it."

"It's terrible for a woman to feel like that, an' goes against God an' nature," he answered. "Have you ever tried prayin' over it?"

"No, I've never tried that, because you see, I don't really mind it very much. Please give me my glove now, here is Judy's cottage."

"But promise me first that you'll try prayin' over your state of mind, an' that I may go on hopin' that you will change it?"

Turning with her hand still outstretched for the glove, she glanced roguishly from his face to the shuttered window of the Hatch cottage.

"Oh, I don't mind your hoping," she answered, composing her expression to demureness, "if only you won't hope — very hard."

Then, leaving him overwhelmed by his emotions, she tripped up the narrow walk, bordered by stunted rose-bushes, to the crumbling porch of Solomon's house. At the door a bright new gig, with red wheels, caught her eye, and before the mischievous dimples had fled from her cheek, she ran into the arms of the Reverend Orlando Mullen.

Her confusion brought a beautiful colour into his cheeks, while, in a chivalrous effort to shield her from further embarrassment, he turned his eyes to the face of Judy Hatch, which was lifted at his side like the rapt countenance of one of the wan-featured, adoring saints of a Fra Angelico painting. No one — not even the nurse of his infancy — had ever imputed a fault either to his character or to his deportment; for he had come into the world endowed with an infallible instinct for the commonplace. In any profession he would have won success as a shining light of mediocrity, since the ruling motive of his conduct was less the ambition to excel than the moral inability to be peculiar. His mind was small and solemn, and he had worn three straight and unyielding wrinkles across his forehead in his earnest endeavour to prevent people from acting, and especially from thinking, lightly. This sedulous devotion to the public morals kept him not only a trifle spare in figure, but lent an habitual manner of divine authority to his most trivial utterance. His head, seen from the rear, was a little flat, but this, fortunately, did not show in the pulpit — where at the age of twenty-four his eloquence enraptured his congregation.

"I postponed my visit to Applegate until to-morrow," he said, when he had given her what he thought was sufficient time to recover her composure. "If you are returning shortly, perhaps I may have the pleasure of driving you in my gig. I have just come to inquire after Mrs. Hatch."

"It would be kind of you, for I am a little tired," responded Molly. "I came to speak to Judy, and then I am to stop at the mill to borrow a pattern from Blossom Revercomb. Are you going that way, I wonder?"

"I shall make it my way," he replied gallantly, "as soon as you are ready. Don't hurry, I beg of you. It is gratifying to me to find that you have so soon taken my advice and devoted a portion of your days to visiting the sick and the afflicted."

With her back discreetly turned upon Judy, she looked up at him for a moment, and something in her eyes rendered unnecessary the words that fell slowly and softly from her lips.

"You give such good advice, Mr. Mullen."

A boyish eagerness showed in his face, breaking through the professional austerity of his manner.

"I hope you've advised Judy this morning," she added before he could answer.

"To the best of my ability," he replied gravely. "And now, as I have said before, there is no hurry, but if you are quite ready, I should suggest our starting."

"Just a word or two with Judy," she answered, and when the words were spoken in the doorway she laid her hand in the rector's and mounted, with his scrupulous assistance, over the red wheel to the shining black seat of the gig, which smelt of leather and varnish. After he had taken his place beside her he tucked in the laprobe carefully at the corners, rearranged the position of his overcoat at her back, and suggested that she should put the bottle of cough syrup in the bottom of the vehicle.

Like all his attentions, this solicitude about the cough syrup had an air that was at once amorous and ministerial, a manner of implying, "Observe how I take possession of you always to your advantage."

"Are you quite comfortable?" he asked when they had rolled between the stunted rose-bushes into the turnpike.

"Oh, perfectly, you are always so thoughtful, Mr. Mullen."

"I think I am right in ranking thoughtfulness — or consideration, I should have said — among the virtues."

"Indeed you are; as soon as I found that you had not gone to Applegate as you intended to, I said to myself that, of course, some act of kindness, had detained you."

His large, very round grey eyes grew soft as he looked at her.

"You have expressed it beautifully, as 'an act of kindness,'" he returned, "since you yourself were the cause of my postponing my visit."

"I — oh, you can't mean it? What have I done?"

"Nothing. Don't alarm yourself — absolutely nothing. Three months ago when I spoke to you of marriage, you entreated me to allow you a little time in which to accustom yourself to my proposal. That time of probation, which has been, I hope, equally trying to us both, has ended to-day."

"But I don't think I really love you, Mr. Mullen."

"I trust your eyes rather than your words — and your eyes have told me, all unconsciously to yourself, your secret."

"Well, I do love your sermons, but —— "

"My sermons are myself. There is nothing in my life, I trust, that belies my preaching."

"I know how good you are, but honestly and truly, I don't want to marry anybody."

His smile hardened slowly on his face like an impression on metal that cools into solidity. From the beginning he had conducted his courtship, as he had conducted his sacred office, with the manner of a gentleman and the infallibility of an apostle. Doubt of his perfect fitness for either vocation had never entered his head. Had it done so he would probably have dismissed it as one of the insidious suggestions of the lower man — for the lower man was a creature who habitually disagreed with his opinions and whom his soul abhorred.

As he sat beside her, clerical, well-groomed, with his look of small yet solemn intelligence, she wondered seriously if he would, in spite of all opposition, have his way with her at last and pattern her to his liking?

"I am not in the least what you think me, Mr. Mullen — I don't know just how to say it —— "

"There is but one thing you need know, dearest, and that is that you love me. As our greatest poet has expressed it 'To know no more is woman's happiest knowledge.' "

"But I can't feel that you really — really care for me. How can you?"

With a tender gesture, he laid his free hand on hers while he looked into her downcast face.

"You allude, I suppose, to the sad fact of your birth," he replied gently, "but after you have become my wife, you will, of course need no name but mine."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Mullen, but really I didn't mean you to think — Oh, there's the mill and Abel looking out of the window. Please, please don't sit so close to me, and look as if we were discussing your sick parishioners."

He obeyed her instantly, quite as circumspect as she in his regard for the proprieties.

"You are excited now, Molly dear, but you will not forbid my hoping that you will accept my proposal," he remarked persuasively as the gig drew up to the Revercombs' gate.

"Well, yes, if you'll let me get down now, you may hope, if you wish to."

Alighting over the wheel before he could draw off his glove and assist her, she hurried, under Abel's eyes, to the porch, where Blossom Revercomb stood gazing happily in the direction of Jordan's Journey

CHAPTER X

THE REVEREND ORLANDO MULLEN PREACHES A SERMON

ON THE following Sunday, a mild autumn morning, Mr. Mullen preached one of his most impressive sermons from the text, "*She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.*"

Woman, he said in the course of it, was created to look after the ways of her household in order that man might go out into the world and make a career. No womanly woman cared to make a career. What the womanly woman desired was to remain an Incentive, an Ideal, an Inspiration. If the womanly woman possessed a talent, she did not use it — for this would unsex her — she sacrificed it in herself in order that she might return it to the race through her sons. Self-sacrifice — to use a worn metaphor — self-sacrifice was the breath of the nostrils of the womanly woman. It was for her power of self-sacrifice that men loved her and made an Ideal of her. Whatever else woman gave up, she must always retain her power of self-sacrifice if she expected the heart of her husband to rejoice in her. The home was founded on sacrifice, and woman was the pillar and the ornament of the home. There was her sphere, her purpose, her mission. All things outside of that sphere belonged to man, except the privilege of ministering to the sick and the afflicted in other households.

He leaned forward in the old pulpit, his shapely, well-kept hand hanging over the edge in one of his most characteristic gestures; and the autumn sunlight, falling through the plain glass windows, shone on his fresh, earnest face, and on his chestnut hair, with glints of gold in it, which grew in high peaks from his temples. Immediately below him, in a front pew, sat his mother, a dried little old woman, with beady black eyes and a pointed chin, which jutted out from between the stiff taffeta strings of her poke bonnet. She gazed upward, clasping her Prayer-book in her black woollen gloves, which were darned in the fingers; and though she appeared to listen attentively to the sermon, she was wondering all the time if the coloured servant at home would remember to baste the roast pig she had left in the oven. To-day was the Reverend Orlando's birthday, and the speckled pig she had fattened through the summer, lay now, with an apple in his mouth, on the trencher. She had invited Molly to dine with them rather against her wishes, for she harboured a secret fear that the girl was trying to marry the rector. Besides, as she said to herself, with her eyes on Orlando's hand, how on earth could he do full justice to the pig if there was a pretty parishioner to distract his attention?

In the pew next to Mrs. Mullen sat old Adam Doolittle, his hand behind his left ear, his withered old lips moving as if he were repeating the words of the sermon. From time to time he shook his head as though he disagreed with a sentence, and then his lips worked more rapidly, and an obstinate argumentative look appeared in his face. Mentally he was conducting a theological dispute with the preacher in which the younger man suffered always a crushing rhetorical defeat. Behind him sat the miller and Blossom Revercomb, who threw an occasional anxious glance at the empty seat beside Mrs. Gay and Kesiah; and behind them Judy Hatch raised her plain, enraptured face to the pulpit, where the rector had shaken out an immaculately ironed handkerchief and wiped his brow. She knew who had ironed that handkerchief on Wednesday, which was Mrs. Mullen's washing day, and her heart rejoiced as she remembered the care with which she had folded the creases.

It made no difference, said Mr. Mullen, replacing the handkerchief somewhere under his white surplice, whether a woman was ugly or beautiful, since they possessed Scriptural authority for the statement that beauty was vain, and no God-fearing man would rank loveliness of face or form above the capacity for self-sacrifice and the unfailing attendance upon the sick and the afflicted in any parish. Beauty, indeed, was but too often a snare for the unwary — temptresses, he had been told, were usually beautiful persons.

Molly's lips trembled into a smile, and her eyes were wide and bright as she met those of the preacher. For an instant he looked at her, gentle, admonishing, reproachful — then his gaze passed over Judy's seraphic features to the face of an old grey horse that stared wonderingly in through the south window. Along the whitewashed plank fence of the churchyard, other horses were waiting patiently for the service to end, and from several side saddles, of an ancient pattern, hung flopping alpaca riding skirts, which the farmer's wives or daughters had worn over their best gowns to church. A few locust trees shed their remaining small yellow leaves on the sunken graves, which were surrounded by crumbling wooden enclosures. Here and there, farther off, a flat tombstone was still visible in the tall grass; and over the dust of old Jonathan Gay a high marble cross, selected by his brother's widow, bore the words, unstained by the dripping trees, and innocent of satire: "Here lieth in the hope of a joyful resurrection ——"

At the end of the service there was a rustle either of relief or disappointment, and the congregation filed slowly through the south doors, where the old grey horse stood resigned and expectant amid the obliterated graves. Mrs. Gay, who had lingered in the walk to speak to Mr. Mullen, raised her plaintive violet eyes to his face when he appeared.

"You are always so comforting. I don't know how to thank you for helping me," she murmured, and added impulsively to the little old woman at his side, "Oh, what a blessing such a son must be to you!"

"Orlando's never given me a moment's worry in his life, ma'am — not even when he was teething," replied Mrs. Mullen, who looked sharper and more withered than ever in the broad daylight. "If you'll believe me, he wasn't more than six months old when I said to his father that I could tell by the look of him he was intended for the ministry. Such sweetness, such self-control even as an infant."

"How happy he must make you! And then, to have the privilege of hearing his beautiful sermons! But you'll lose him some day, as I was just saying to Kesiah. It won't be long before some fortunate woman takes him away from you. We can only hope she will be worthy of the ideal he has of her."

"Ah, that's just it, Mrs. Gay, I sometimes tell myself there isn't a woman in the world that's fit for him."

She spoke as fast as she could, eager to dilate on the subject of the embarrassed Orlando's virtues, flattered in her motherly old heart by the praise of his sermons, and yet, all the time, while her peaked chin worked excitedly, thinking about the roasted young pig that waited for her to attend to the garnishing.

The delay was short; Orlando silenced her at last by a gentle admonitory pressure of her elbow, and the two ladies drove off in their carriage, while Molly walked sedately out of the churchyard between the clergyman and his mother. The girl was pleasantly aware that the eyes of the miller and of Jim Halloween followed her disapprovingly as she went; and she thought with complacency that she had never looked better than she did in her white felt hat with its upturned brim held back by cherry-coloured ribbon. It was all very well for the rector to say that beauty was of less importance than visiting the sick, but the fact remained that Judy Hatch visited the sick more zealously than she — and yet he was very far, indeed, from falling in love with Judy Hatch! The contradiction between man and his ideal of himself was embodied before her under a clerical waistcoat.

"I believe," remarked the Reverend Orlando, thrusting his short chin as far as possible over his collar, which buttoned at the back, "I believe that the elder Doolittle nourishes some private grudge against me. He has a most annoying habit of shaking his head at me during the sermon as though he disagreed with my remarks."

"The man must be an infidel," observed Mrs. Mullen, with asperity, as she moved on in front of him.

"He doesn't know half the time what he is doing," said Molly, "you know he passed his ninetieth birthday last summer."

"But surely you cannot mean that you consider age an excuse for either incivility or irreligion," rejoined her lover, pushing aside an impertinent carrot flower that had shed its pollen on his long coat, while he regarded his mother's back with the expression of indignant suspicion he unconsciously assumed on the rare occasions when his opinions were disputed. "Age should mellow, should soften, should sweeten."

"I suppose it should, but very often it doesn't," retorted Molly, a trifle tartly, for the sermon had bored her and she looked forward with dread to the dinner.

At her words Mrs. Mullen, who was walking a little ahead, with her skirts held up to avoid the yellow stain of the late golden-rod, glanced sharply back, as she had done in church when old Adam had coughed at the wrong time and spoiled the full effect of a period.

"One reason that Orlando is so helpful to people is that he always sees so clearly just what they ought to be," she observed. "I don't believe there's a man in the ministry or out, who has a higher ideal of woman and her duty."

"But do women ever live up to his ideal of them?"

"It isn't his fault if they don't. All he can do is to point it out to them earnestly and without ceasing."

They had reached the rectory gate, where she hesitated an instant with her hand on the latch, and her head bent toward the house in a surprised and listening attitude. "I declare, Orlando, if I didn't go off and leave that cat locked up in the parlour!" she exclaimed in horror as she hurried away.

"Yes," observed Mr. Mullen in his tenderest and most ministerial manner, "my ideal is a high one, and when I look into your face, I see reflected all the virtues I would have you reach. I see you the perfect woman, sharing my sorrows, easing my afflictions ——"

Intoxicated by his imagination, he turned toward her as though he beheld the living embodiment of his eloquence.

For a minute Molly smiled up at him; then, "I wonder if your mother really locked the cat in the parlour," she rejoined demurely.

After the birthday dinner, at which Mrs. Mullen talked ceaselessly of Orlando's excellencies, while she reserved the choicest piece of meat and the fattest dumpling for his plate, Molly tied her cherry-coloured strings under her chin, and started home, with a basket of apple tarts for Reuben on her arm. At the crossroads Mr. Mullen left her to return to an afternoon Sunday school, and she was about to stop at the ordinary to ask William to see her safely over the pasture, when Abel Revercomb, looking a trifle awkward in his Sunday clothes, came out of the house and held out his hand for the basket.

"I thought you'd be coming home this way after dinner," he said, turning his head stiffly because his high, starched collar hurt his throat when he moved. His hair was brushed flat on his head as was his habit on Sundays, and he wore a vivid purple tie, which he had bought on his last journey to Applegate. He had never looked worse, nor had he ever felt quite so confident of the entire correctness of his appearance.

As Molly made no reply, but merely fell into step at his side, he inquired, after a moment's pause, "How did you enjoy the sermon?"

"Oh, I don't like to be preached at, and I'm sorry for Mr. Mullen's wife if he expects her to ease everybody's pains in the parish. He looked very handsome in church," she added, "didn't you think so?"

"I didn't notice," he answered ruefully. "I never pay any attention to the way a man looks, in church or out of it."

"Well, I do — and even Judy Hatch does. She asked me the other day whom I thought the handsomest man in the neighbourhood, and I'm sure she expected me to say Mr. Mullen."

She dimpled, and his arm went out impulsively toward her.

"But you didn't, Molly?" he returned.

"Why, of course not — did you imagine that I should? I said I thought Mr. Jonathan Gay was the best looking."

His arm fell to his side, and for a minute or two he walked on in silence.

"I wish I didn't love you, Molly," he burst out at last. "I sometimes almost believe that you're one of the temptresses Mr. Mullen preached against this morning. I've tried again and again to tear you out of my heart, but it is useless."

"Yes, it's useless, Abel," she answered, melting to dimples.

"I tell myself," he went on passionately, "that you're not worth it — that you're perfectly heartless — that you're only a flirt — that other men have held your hands, kissed your lips even ——"

"And after telling yourself those dreadful truths, what happens?" she inquired with interest.

"What happens? Well, I go to work and don't think of you for at least three hours. Then, when I am dead tired I stop for a minute to rest, and as soon as my eyes fall on a bit of green grass, or a flower growing by the road, or the blue sky, there you are again, popping in between them with your big eyes and your red mouth that was made for kisses. I forget how heartless and light you are, and remember only the times you've crept up to me and put your hand on my arm and said, 'Abel, I'm sorry.' Most of all I remember the one time you kissed me, Molly."

"Don't, Abel," she said quickly, and her voice broke and died in her throat.

As he drew close to her, she walked faster until her steps changed into a run.

"If you only knew me as I am, you wouldn't care so, Abel," she threw back at him.

"I don't believe you know yourself as you are, Molly," he answered. "It's not you that leads men on to make love to you and then throws them over — as you have thrown me — as you will throw Mr. Mullen." His tone grew suddenly stern. "You don't love Mr. Mullen, and you know it," he added. "If you love any man on earth to-day, you love me."

At his first change from tenderness to accusation, her face hardened and her voice returned to her control.

"What right have you to judge me, Abel Revercomb?" she asked angrily. "I've had one sermon preached at me to-day, and I'll not listen to another."

"You know I'm not preaching at you, Molly, but I'm a man of flesh and blood, not of straw. How can I have patience?"

"I never asked you to have patience, did I?"

"No, and I don't believe you want it. If I'd catch hold of you and shake you, you'd probably like me better."

"It's just as well that you don't try it to see how I'll take it."

"Oh, I shan't try it. I'll go on still believing in you against yourself, like the born fool I am."

"You may believe in me or not just as you please — but it isn't my fault if you won't go off and marry Judy Hatch, as I have begged you to. She's everything on earth that Mr. Mullen preached about to-day in his sermon."

"Hang Judy Hatch! You are bent on starting a quarrel with me, that is the trouble. As soon as you mentioned Jonathan Gay I knew what you were in for."

"As if I couldn't say a man was good looking without putting you into a rage."

"I'm not in a rage, but I hate a flirt. Every sensible man does."

"Judy Hatch isn't a flirt."

"Leave Judy Hatch out of it — though I've more than half a mind to walk off and ask her to marry me."

"That's just what I've advised you to do for the last six months, isn't it?"

"Ah, no, you haven't, Molly, no, you haven't — and you'd be just as sorry as I the minute after I had done it. You've got some small foolish childish notions in your head about hating men — but you're much nearer loving me than hating me at this moment, and that's why you're afraid!"

"I'm not afraid — how dare you say so?"

"Oh, my pretty, how foolish we are, both of us! I'd work my fingers to the bone for you, Molly, I'd lie down and let your little feet walk over me if they wanted to — I'd shed my life's blood for you, day by day, if it could help you."

"Every one of you say this in the beginning, but it isn't true in the end," she answered.

"Not true — not true? Prove it. Why do you think I've struggled and raised myself except to keep equal with you? Why did I go to school and teach myself and make money enough to take classes in Applegate? Just for you. All those winter afternoons when I drove over there to learn things, I was thinking of you. Do you remember that when you were at school in Applegate, you'd tell me the names of the books you read so that I might get them?"

"Don't," she cried fiercely, "don't tell me those things, for I'll never believe them — even if they are true, I'll never believe them! I'm all hard and bitter inside, there's no softness in me. If I went on my knees and prayed to love, I couldn't do it. Oh, Abel, there isn't any love in my heart!"

"Do you remember when you kissed me?"

"No, I have forgotten."

"It was only three weeks ago."

"Yes, that was three weeks ago."

The light died slowly out of his eyes as he looked at her.

"When you speak like that I begin to wonder if any good can ever come to us," he returned. "I've gone on breaking my heart over you ever since you were a little girl in short dresses, and I can't remember that I've ever had anything but misery from you in my life. It's damnable the things I've stood and yet I've always forgotten them afterwards, and remembered only the times you were soft and gentle and had ceased to be shrewish. Nobody on earth can be softer than you, Molly, when you want to, and it's your softness, after all, that has held me in spite of your treatment. Why, your mouth was like a flower when I kissed you, and parted and clung to me ——"

"I wish you wouldn't talk about it. I hate to hear such things after they are over."

"Such things!" He stood flicking hopelessly with a small branch he carried at the carrot flowers in the field. "If you will tell me honestly that you were playing with me, Molly, I'll give you up this minute," he said.

The colour was high in her face and she did not look at him.

"I was playing with you, and I told you so the day afterwards," she replied.

"Yes, but you didn't mean it. I can't go any further because this is Mr. Jonathan's land."

His eyes had in them the hurt reproachful look of a wounded dog's, and his voice trembled a little.

"I meant always — always to lead you on until I could hurt you — as I did with the others — and then throw you over."

"And now that you can hurt me, you throw me over?" he asked.

Without speaking, she held out her hand for the basket, which he was about to fling from him.

"Then I'll never forgive you, Molly, so help me God," he added harshly; and turning away from her, struck out across the pasture in the direction of the mill.

For a moment she stood looking after him, her lips parted, her eyes wide and bright as if she were asking a question.

"I am hard — hard and cruel," she thought as she went slowly up the witch-hazel path that led by the Poplar Spring, "but I wonder — oh, I wonder if I treat Abel worst because I like him best?"

CHAPTER XI

A FLIGHT AND AN ENCOUNTER

When Abel had flung himself over the fence, he snatched the collar from his neck and threw it away from him into the high grass of the meadow. The act was symbolical not only of his revolt from the power of love, but, in a larger measure, of his rebellion against the tyranny of convention. Henceforth his Sunday clothes might hang in the closet, for he would never again bend his neck to the starched yoke of custom. Everything had been for Molly, and he was done with Molly forever. Her smiles or her frowns, her softness or her cruelty, would make no difference to him in the future — for had not Molly openly implied that she preferred Mr. Mullen? So this was the end of it all — the end of his ambition, of his struggle to raise himself, of his battle for a little learning that she might not be ashamed. Lifting his head he could see dimly the one great pine that towered on the hill over its fellows, and he resolved, in the bitterness of his defeat, that he would sell the whole wood to-morrow in Applegate. He tried to think clearly — to tell himself that he had never believed in her — that he had always known she would throw him over at the last — but the agony in his heart rose in his throat, and he felt that he was stifling in the open air of the pasture. His nature, large, impulsive, scornful of small complexities, was stripped bare of the veneer of culture by which its simplicity had been overlaid. At the instant he was closer to the soil beneath his feet than to the civilization of his race.

As he neared the brook, which divided his pasture from the fields belonging to Jordan's Journey, the sound of angry voices came to his ears, and through the bared twigs of the willows, he saw Archie and Jonathan Gay standing a little apart, while the boy made threatening gestures with a small switch he carried.

"I've told him he was not to come on our land and he's laughed in my face!" cried Archie, turning to his brother.

"I'm not laughing, I merely said that the restriction was absurd," replied Jonathan in a friendly tone. "Why, this pasture of yours juts in between my field and the road, and I'm obliged to cross it. I told you before I was awfully sorry about that quarrel when I first came, but as long as you leave my birds alone, you may walk over my land all day if you like and I shan't care a copper."

"Damn your birds! I don't take a blow from any man without paying him back," retorted Archie.

"Hold your tongue, Archie," said Abel sternly. "It's my farm, I reckon, and I can manage it. I'm sorry, Mr. Jonathan," he added, "that you started the trouble, but we aren't people to sit down tamely and take a thrashing from you just because you happen to own Jordan's Journey. I'll stand by Archie because he's right, though if he were not right, I'd still stand by him because he's my brother. The best we can do is to keep clear of each other. We don't go on your place and you'd just as well take care to keep off ours."

A frown contracted Gay's brow, while he glanced anxiously over his shoulder at the crooked path which led in the direction of the mill.

"Do you mean to say that you object to my taking a stroll through your meadows?" he asked.

"Why on earth do you want to stroll over here when you've got two thousand acres on every other blessed side of you?"

When the other's reply came there was a curious hesitation about it.

"Well, a man has his fancies, you know. I've taken a liking to this path through the willows."

"All the same I warn you that if you keep it up, you'll very likely run into trouble. If Archie sets the dogs on you, I'll be obliged to stand by him."

Without waiting for a response, he put his hand on the boy's shoulder, and pushed him over the brook into the path on the opposite side. To his surprise Blossom, dressed as though for church, appeared there at the instant.

"Why, where in thunder are you going?" he demanded, releasing Archie, who staggered back at the sudden withdrawal of the powerful grasp. He had always known that his niece was a handsome girl, but the bloom, the softness of her beauty came to him while he stood there, as vividly as if for the first time.

"I — I—have you seen grandma's cat?" she returned after the breathless suspense of a minute.

"No, I don't think you'll find her down there.

Archie and Mr. Jonathan have quarreled loud enough to frighten her away."

"Quarreled again!" she said. "Oh, why have they quarreled again?"

"He must keep off our place," replied Archie, angrily. "I warned him I'll set the dogs on him the next time I find him on this side the fence!"

"How — how can you be so uncivilized?" she returned, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Uncivilized or not, he'll find he can't split my lip open for nothing," growled Archie, like a sullen child.

"You'd as well come back with us," said Abel, "the cat isn't down there — I'd take a look in the mill."

She turned her face away, stooping to pluck the withered frond of a fern that grew in the path. When she looked up at him again all the bloom and radiance had flown.

"Yes, I'll come back with you," she answered, and falling into step between them, walked languidly up the hill to the kitchen garden at the top. In his own misery Abel was hardly aware of her, and he heard as from a distance, Archie's muttered threats against Gay, and Blossom's palpitating responses. When they reached the house, Sarah's yellow and white cat squeezed herself through the door and came purring toward them.

"Why, the cat's got back!" exclaimed Archie.

"It must have been in the store-room all the time," returned Blossom quickly. "I forgot to look there. Now, I must go and pour out the buttermilk for dinner before grandma scolds me."

She turned away, glanced back an instant later to make sure that they had entered the house, and then gathering up her Sunday skirt of blue Henrietta cloth, started in a rapid run back along the path to the willows. When she reached a sheltered nook, formed by a lattice of boughs, she found Gay walking impatiently back and forth, with his hands in his pockets and the anxious frown still on his forehead. At sight of her, his face cleared and he held out his arms.

"My beauty! — I'd just given you up. Five minutes more by my watch, and I should have gone."

"I met Abel and Archie as I was coming and they made me go back with them," she answered, placing her hand on her bosom, which rose and fell with her fluttering breath. It was characteristic of their different temperaments that, although he had seen her every day for three weeks, he still met her with outstretched arms, which she still evaded. Since that first stolen kiss, she had held off from him, alluring yet unapproachable, and this gentle, but obstinate, resistance had inflamed him to a point which he admitted, in the cold grey mornings before he had breakfasted, to have become positively dangerous. Ardently susceptible to beauty, the freedom of his life had bred in him an almost equal worship of the unattainable. If that first kiss had stirred his fancy, her subsequent repulse had established her influence. The stubborn virtue, which was a part of the inherited fibre of her race, had achieved a result not unworthy of the most finished coquette. Against his desire for possession there battled the instinctive chastity that was woven into the structure of Sarah Revercomb's granddaughter. Hardly less violent than the natural impulse against which it warred, it gave Blossom an advantage, which the obvious weakness of her heart had helped to increase. It was as though she yearned toward him while she resisted — as though she feared him most in the moment that she repulsed him.

"Good God! how beautiful you are and how cold!" he exclaimed.

"I am not cold. How can you say so when you know it isn't true?"

"I've been waiting here an hour, half dead with impatience, and you won't so much as let me touch you for a reward."

"I can't — you oughtn't to ask me, Mr. Jonathan."

"Could a single kiss hurt you? I kissed you once."

"It's — it's because you kissed me once that you mustn't kiss me again."

"You mean you didn't like it?"

"What makes you so unkind? You know it isn't that."

"Then why do you refuse?" He was in an irritable humour, and this irritation showed in his face, in his movements, in the short, abrupt sound of his words.

"I can't let you do it because — because I didn't know what it was like until that first time," she protested, while two large tears rolled from her eyes.

Softened by her confusion, his genial smile shone on her for an instant before the gloom returned to his features. The last few weeks had preyed on his nerves until he told himself that he could no longer control the working of his emotions. The solitude, the emptiness of his days, the restraint put upon him by his invalid mother — all these engendered a condition of mind in which any transient fancy might develop into a winged fury of impulse. There were times when his desire for Blossom's beauty appeared to fill the desolate space, and he hungered and thirsted for her actual presence at his side. In the excitement of a great city, he would probably have forgotten her in a month after their first meeting. Here, in this monotonous country, there was nothing for him but to brood over each trivial detail until her figure stood out in his imagination edged by the artificial light he had created around it. Her beauty, which would have been noticeable even in a crowd, became goddess-like against the low horizon in the midst of the November colours.

"If you only knew how I suffer from you, darling," he said, "I haven't slept for nights because you refused to kiss me."

"I — I haven't slept either," she faltered.

"Because of me, Blossom?"

"I begin to think and it makes me so unhappy."

"Oh, damn it! Do you love me, Blossom?"

"What difference does it make whether I do or not?"

"It makes all the difference under Heaven! Would you like to love me, Blossom?"

"I oughtn't to let myself think of it, and I don't when I can help it."

"But can you help it? Tell me, can you help it?"

Turning away from him, she cast a startled glance under the willows in the direction of the house.

"I must be going back. They will miss me."

"Don't you think I shall miss you, Beauty?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought."

"If you knew how miserable I'll be after you have left me, you'd kiss me once before you go."

"Don't ask me, I can't — I really can't, Mr. Jonathan."

"Hang Mr. Jonathan and all that appertains to him! What's to become of me, condemned to this solitude, if you refuse to be kind to me? By Jove, if it wasn't for my mother, I'd ask you to marry me!"

"I don't want to marry you," she responded haughtily, and completed her triumph. Something stronger than passion — that *something* compounded partly of moral fibre, partly of a phlegmatic temperament, guided her at the critical moment. His words had been casual, but her reception of them charged them with seriousness almost before he was aware. A passing impulse was crystallized by the coldness of her manner into a permanent desire.

"If I were free to do it, I'd make you want to," he said.

She moved from him, walking rapidly into the deeper shelter of the willows. The autumn sunlight, shining through the leafless boughs, cast a delicate netting of shadows over the brilliant fairness of her body. He saw the rose of her cheek melting into the warm whiteness of her throat, which was encircled by two deliciously infantile creases of flesh. To look at her led almost inevitably to the desire to touch her.

"Are you going without a word to me, Blossom?"

"I don't know what to say — you never seem to believe me."

"You know well enough what I want you to say — but you're frozen all through, that's what's the matter."

"Good-bye, Mr. Jonathan."

"At what hour to-morrow, Blossom?"

She shook her head, softly obstinate.

"I mustn't meet you again. If grandma — or any of the others found out they would never forgive me — they are so stern and straight. I've gone too far already, and besides ——"

"Besides what?"

"You make me feel wicked and underhand."

"Do you mean that you can walk off like this and never see me again?"

Tears came to her eyes. "You oughtn't to put it like that!"

"But that's just what it means. Now, darling, do you think you can do it?"

"I won't think — but I'll have to do it."

His nervous irritability became suddenly violent, and the muscles of his face contracted as if from a spasm of physical pain.

"Confound it all! Why shouldn't I marry you, Blossom?" he burst out. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and you look every inch a lady. If it wasn't for my mother I'd pick you up to-day and carry you off to Washington."

"Your mother would never give in. There's no use talking about it."

"It isn't her giving in, but her health. You see, she has heart disease, and any sudden shock brings on one of these terrible attacks that may kill her. She bears everything like an angel — I never heard a complaint from her in my life — not even when she was suffering tortures — but the doctors say now that another failure of her heart would be fatal."

"I know," she admitted softly, "they said that twenty years ago, didn't they?"

"Well, she's been on her back almost all the time during those twenty years. It's wonderful what she's borne — her angelic patience. And, of course, her hopes all hang on me now. She's got nobody else."

"But I thought Miss Kesiah was so devoted to her."

"Oh, she is — she is, but Aunt Kesiah has never really understood her. Just to look at them, you can tell how different they are. That's how it is, Blossom — I'm tied, you see — tied hand and foot."

"Yes, I see," she rejoined. "Your uncle was tied, too. I've heard that he used to say — tied with a silk string, he called it."

"You wouldn't have me murder my mother, would you?" he demanded irritably, kicking at the twisted root of a willow.

"Good-bye, Mr. Jonathan," she responded quietly, and started toward the house.

"Wait a minute, — oh, Blossom, come back!" he entreated — but without pausing she ran quickly up the crooked path under the netting of shadows.

"So that's the end," said Gay angrily. "By Jove, I'm well out of it," and went home to dinner. "I won't see her again," he thought as he entered the house, and the next instant, when he ascended the staircase, "I never saw such a mouth in my life. It looks as if it would melt if you kissed it —— "

The dinner, which was pompously served by Abednego and a younger butler, seemed to him tasteless and stale, and he complained querulously of a bit of cork he found in his wine glass. His mother, supported by cushions in her chair at the head of the table, to which he had brought her in his arms, lamented his lack of appetite, and inquired tenderly if he were suffering? For the first time in his life he discovered that he was extinguishing, with difficulty, a smouldering resentment against her. Kesiah's ugliness became a positive affront to him, and he felt as bitterly toward her as though she had purposely designed her appearance in order to annoy him. The wine she drank showed immediately in her face, and he determined to tell his mother privately that she must forbid her sister to drink anything but water. By the dim gilt framed mirror above the mantel he discovered that his own features were flushed, also, but a red face was not, he felt, a cause of compunction to one of his sex.

"You haven't eaten your mutton, dear," said Mrs. Gay anxiously. "I ordered it especially because you like it. Are you feeling unwell?"

"I'm not hungry," he replied, rather crossly. "This place gets on my nerves, and will end by driving me mad."

"I suppose you'd better go away," she returned, plaintively wounded. "I wouldn't be so selfish as to want to keep you by me if you are unhappy."

"I don't want to leave you, mother — but, I ought to get back to the stock market. It's no good idling around — I don't think I was cut out for a farmer."

"Try this sherry. Your uncle brought it from Spain, and it was buried during the war."

He filled his glass, drained it quickly, and with an effort recovered his temper.

"Yes, I'd better go," he repeated, and knew while he spoke that he could not leave as long as the thought of Blossom tormented him. Swift half visions of her loveliness — of certain delectable details of her face or figure flitted always before him. He saw her eyes, like frosted periwinkles under their warm white lids, which appeared too heavy to open wide; the little brown mole that played up and down when she laughed; and the soft, babyish creases that encircled her throat. Each of these memories set his heart to a quicker beating and caused a warm sensation, like the caress of a burning sun, to pass over his body.

"The Revercombs over at the mill are kicking up a row, mother," he said suddenly, again filling his wine glass and again putting it down empty, "have they any sort of standing in the county, do you suppose?"

"I've heard they call themselves connections of the Revercombs higher in the State, dear — but I don't know and I've never come into contact with any of the country people about here. Kesiah may be able to tell you."

Until then neither of them had alluded to Kesiah, whom they accepted by ignoring much as if she had been one of the familiar pieces of furniture, at which they never glanced because they were so firmly convinced that it stood in its place. She had eaten her dinner with the relish of a person to whom food, taken at regular hours three times a day, has become the prime consolation in life; and when the question was put to her, she was obliged to ask them to repeat it because she had been thoughtfully regarding a dish of baked tomatoes and wondering if a single yielding to temptation would increase a tendency to the gout that had lately developed.

"What do you know of the Revercombs, Kesiah?

Are they in any degree above the common people about here?"

"The miller is a rather extraordinary character, I believe," she answered, lifting the spoon out of the dish of tomatoes as it was handed to her, and then shaking her head with a sigh and letting it fall. "Mr. Chamberlayne says he is quite well educated, but the rest of them, of course, are very primitive and plain. They have always been strait-laced and honest and I hear that the mother — she came from Piping Tree and was one of the Hawtreys — is violently opposed to her son's marriage with Molly Merryweather. There is a daughter, also, who is said to be beautiful though rather dull."

"Yes, I've seen the girl," observed Mrs. Gay, "heavy and blond, isn't she? The mother, I should say, is decidedly the character of the family. She has rather terrible convictions, and once a great many years ago, she came over here — forced her way into my sick-room to rebuke me about the behaviour of the servants or something. Your Uncle Jonathan was obliged to lead her out and pacify her — she was quite upset, I remember. By the way, Kesiah," she pursued, "haven't I heard that Mr. Mullen is attentive to the daughter? It seems a pity, for he is quite a superior young man — his sermons are really remarkable, and he might easily have done better."

"Oh, that was when he first came here, Angela, before he met Molly Merryweather. It's singular the fascination that girl possesses for the men around here."

Gay laughed shortly. "Well, it's a primitive folk, isn't it?" he said, "and gets on the nerves after a while."

Through the afternoon he was restless and out of humour, tormented less by the memory of Blossom's face than by the little brown mole on her cheek. He resolved a dozen times a day that he would not see her, and in the very act of resolving, he would begin to devise means of waylaying her as she went down to the store or passed to and from the pasture. A certain sex hatred, which is closely allied to the mere physical fact of love, asserted itself at times, and he raged hotly against her coldness, her indifference, against the very remoteness that attracted him. Then he would soften to her, and with the softening there came always the longing not only to see, but to touch her — to breathe her breath, to lay his hand on her throat.

The next day he went to the willow copse, but she did not come. On the one following, he took down his gun and started out to shoot partridges, but when the hour of the meeting came, he found himself wandering over the fields near the Revercombs' pasture, with his eye on the little path down which she had come that rimy October morning. The third afternoon, when he had watched for her in a fury of disappointment, he ordered his horse and went for a gallop down the sunken road to the mill. At the first turn, where the woods opened into a burned out clearing, he came suddenly upon her, and the hunger at his heart gave place to a delicious sense of fulfilment.

"Blossom, how can you torture me so?" he exclaimed when he had dismounted at her side and flung his arm about her.

She drew slowly away, submissive even in her avoidance.

"I did not mean to torture you — I'm sorry," she answered humbly.

"It's come to this!" he burst out, "that I can't stand it another week without losing my senses. I've thought till I'm distracted. Blossom, will you marry me?"

"O Mr. Jonathan!" she gasped while her breast fluttered like a bird's.

"Not openly, of course — there's my mother to think of — but I'll take you to Washington — we'll find a way somehow. Can't you arrange to go to Applegate for a day or two, or let your people think you have?"

"I can — yes —" she responded in the same troubled tone. "I've a school friend living there, and I sometimes spend several days with her."

"Then go on Saturday — no, let's see — this is Tuesday. Can you go on Friday, darling?"

"Perhaps. I can't tell — I think so — I must see."

As he drew her forward, she bent toward him, still softly, still humbly, and an instant later, his arms were about her and his lips pressed hers.

CHAPTER XII

THE DREAM AND THE REAL

The following Friday Abel drove Blossom in his gig to the house of her school friend in Applegate, where she was to remain for a week. On his way home he stopped at the store for a bottle of harness oil, and catching the red glow of the fire beyond the threshold of the public room, he went in for a moment to ask old Adam Doolittle about a supply of hominy meal he had ready for him at the mill. As the ancient man crouched over the fire, with his bent hands outstretched and his few silvery hairs rising in the warmth, his profile showed with the exaggeration of a twelfth century grotesque, the features so distorted by the quivering shadows that his beaked nose appeared to rest in the crescent-shaped silhouette of his chin. His mouth was open, and from time to time he shook his head and muttered to himself in an undertone — a habit he had fallen into during the monotonous stretches of Mr. Mullen's sermons. Across from him sat Jim Halloween, and in the middle of the hearth, Solomon Hatch stood wiping the frost from his face with a red cotton handkerchief.

"It's time you were thinkin' about goin' home, I reckon, old Adam," remarked Mrs. Bottom. "You've had yo' two full glasses of cider an' it ain't proper for a man of yo' years to be knockin' around arter dark. This or'nary is goin' to be kept decent as long as I keep it."

"To be sure, to be sure," replied old Adam, nodding cheerfully at the fire, "I ain't all I once was except in the matter of corn-shuckin' — an' a cold-snap like this goes clean to the bones when they ain't covered."

"Did you carry any of yo' winesaps into Applegate, Abel?" inquired Jim Halloween. "I'm savin' mine till Christmas, when the prices will take a jump."

"No, I only drove Blossom over. She's to spend a few days in town."

"Mr. Jonathan's gone off, too, I see," observed Solomon. "He went by at the top of his speed while I was haulin' timber this mornin'. Thar's bad blood still betwixt you an' him, ain't thar, Abel?"

"Oh, I'm not seekin' a quarrel. The trouble is in Archie's hands an' he'll have to keep it there."

"Well, he's a fine shape of a man," declared Betsey Bottom. "Some women try to make out that they ain't got an eye for the shape as long as the sense is all square and solid — but I ain't never been one of 'em. Sense is all right in its place, no doubt, but thar're times when a fine figger is mo' convincin' than any argyment that ever was uttered."

"It's a thing that beats me," pondered Solomon Hatch, "why a sensible woman should care how a man is made on the outside so long as the proper stuffin' is inside of him. With a man now, of course, it is different, seein' as natur made 'em with a sharp eye for beauty in the opposite sex, an' they're all for natur an' al'ays have been. But I'll be blest if I can understand it in women."

"Well, I've noticed that they have a particular likin' for the worthless over the hardworkin' sort," remarked old Adam, "an' when it comes to that, I've known a woman to git clear set against a man on o'count of nothin' bigger than a chaw of tobaccy."

"It's the way of the sex," said Solomon Hatch. "When I was courtin' my wife I was obleeged to promise her I'd give up the habit befo' she'd keep company with me."

"An' you began agin, I low, after the ceremony was spoken."

"To be sure — 'twas a courtin' promise, not a real one."

"It happened the same in my case, some sixty years or mo' ago," said old Adam. "Thar was two of us arter Minnie — for the matter of that, it never entered my head to court her till I saw that Jacob Halloween — yo' grandpa, Jim — had begun to git soft on her. It's safer to trust another man's jedgment than yo' own I said to myself, an' I started into the race. Well, Jacob was the pious, churchgoin' sort that she liked — but he would chaw in season an' out of it — thar was some as said he chawed even when he was sleepin' — an' a woman so out an' out with tobaccy you never set eyes on. Sez she to me, 'Adam, you will give up the weed for me, won't you?' An' sez I, 'Why, to be sartin sure, I will,' meanin', of course, while I was courtin'. Then she answered, 'Well, he's a Christian an' a churchgoer an' you ain't, but if he was the Angel Gabriel himself, Adam, an' was a chawer, I wouldn't marry him. The men may make their habits, Adam,' she said, 'but it takes the women to break 'em.' Lord! Lord! durin' that courtin' season my mouth would water so for a wad of tobaccy that I'd think my tongue was goin' to ketch fire."

"I shouldn't like to have stood in yo' shoes when you began agin," remarked Betsey Bottom.

"Oh, she larned, she larned," chuckled the elder, knocking the ashes out of his pipe on the hearth and then treading them under his boot. "'Tis amazin' what a deal of larnin' women have to do arter they're married."

"If they'd done it befo' thar's precious few of 'em that would ever set foot into the estate!" retorted Betsey. "Thar ain't many men that are worth the havin' when you git close up to 'em. Every inch of distance betwixt em' is an inch added to thar attractions."

"Now, I've noticed that in my own case," observed Jim Halloween sadly, "no woman yet has ever let me come within kissin' distance — the nearer I git, the further an' further they edges away. It's the curse of my luck, I reckon, for it seems as if I never open my mouth to propose that I don't put my foot in it."

"You may comfort yo'self with the thought that it runs in yo' family," rejoined old Adam. "'Tis a contrariness of natur for which you're not to be held accountable. I remember yo' grandpa, that same Jacob, tellin' me once that he never sot out to make love that his tongue didn't take a twist unbeknownst to him, an' to his surprise, thar'd roll off 'turnips' an' 'carrots' instid of terms of endearment. Now, with me 'twas quite opposite, for my tongue was al'ays quicker than my heart in the matter of courtin'. It used to go click! click! quite without my willin' it whenever my eyes lit on a pretty woman."

"Ah, you were a gay young bird, but it's over now," commented Solomon.

"I ain't regrettin' it since I've lived long enough to repent of it," responded the ancient sinner.

"What worries me," said young Adam, pursuing his habitual train of despondency, "is that my life is just one long repentance with naught in it worth repentin' of. 'Tain't for lack of ch'ice I've never tasted, but for lack of opportunity."

"Well, thar's some that even sinners can't suffer," commented his father, "You are short of words, miller."

"I was thinkin'," replied Abel roughly, draining his glass, and rising to his feet while he drew on his sheepskin gloves, "that when the thought of a woman once gets into the brain it's worse than a maggot."

"The best way is to get her," retorted Solomon, "but that ain't so easy a matter as it looks, unless you are a parson. Was thar ever a parson, Mr. Doolittle, that couldn't get married as often as he'd take the notion?"

"Thar may be sech, but I've never seed him an' never heard on him," responded old Adam. "'Tis kind of professional work with 'em an' they've got the advantage of the rest of us bein' so used to pulpit speakin'."

"I suppose our Mr. Mullen might have whomsoever he'd set his eyes on," pursued Solomon.

"Without a doubt he might. If all else failed him he'd but to ax her in his pulpit gown an' his prayin' voice, an' thar'd be no gainsayin' him for a female.

Let him boom out 'Dearly Beloved,' as he does in church an' ten chances to one she'd answer 'Amen' just out of the habit. I'm a bold man, suh, an' I've al'ays been, but I ain't one to stand up ag'inst a preacher when thar's a woman in the race."

Wrapping his blue knitted comforter about his throat, Abel nodded good-humoredly to the group, and went out to his gig, which he had left under a shed in the yard. As he removed the blanket from his mare, his mind dwelt stubbornly on the remarks old Adam had let fall concerning clergymen and women. He had already convinced himself that the Reverend Mr. Mullen was the object of Molly's preference, and his nature was big enough to rejoice that she should have chosen so good a man. At least, if this were true, Jonathan Gay would not be his rival.

It was the season of the year when the sunny days gave place to frosty nights, and all the changes of the autumn — the reddening of the fruit, the ripening of the nuts, the falling of the leaves — appeared to occur in the hours between sunset and sunrise. A thin and watery moon shed a spectral light over the meadows, which seemed to float midway between the ashen band of the road and the jagged tops of the pines on the horizon. There was no wind, and the few remaining leaves on the trees looked as if they were cut out of velvet. The promise of a hoar-frost was in the air — and a silver veil lay already over the distance.

When he had turned into the branch road that led from the turnpike to the mill, a gig passed him, driven rapidly, and Reuben Merryweather called "good-night," in his friendly voice. An instant later a spot of white in the road caught Abel's glance, and alighting, he picked up a knitted scarf, which he recognized even in the moonlight as one that Molly had worn. Looking back he saw that the other gig had stopped at the turnpike, and as he hastened toward it with the scarf in his hand, he was rewarded by a flash of bright eyes from a muffled figure at Reuben's side.

"I found this in the road," he said, "you must have dropped it."

"Yes, it fell out — thank you," she answered, and it seemed to him that her hand lingered an instant in his before it was withdrawn and buried beneath the rugs.

The pressure remained with him, and a little later as he drove over the frosted roads, he could still feel, as in a dream, the soft, clinging touch of her fingers. Essentially an idealist, his character was the result of a veneering of insufficient culture on a groundwork of raw impulse. People and objects appeared to him less through forms of thought than through colours of the emotions; and he saw them out of relation because he saw them under different conditions from those that hold sway over this planet. The world he moved in was peopled by a race of beings that acted under ideal laws and measured up to an impossible standard; and this mixture of rustic ignorance and religious fervour had endowed him with a power of sacrifice in large matters, while it rendered him intolerant of smaller weaknesses. It was characteristic of the man that he should have arranged for Molly in his thoughts, and at the cost of great suffering to himself, a happiness that was suited to the ideal figure rather than to the living woman.

When he entered the kitchen, after putting the mare into her stall, the familiar room, with its comfortable warmth, dragged him back into a reality in which the dominating spirit was Sarah Revercomb. Even his aching heart seemed to recognize her authority, and to obtrude itself with a sense of embarrassment into surroundings where all mental maladies were outlawed. She was on her knees busily sorting a pile of sweet potatoes, which she suspected of having been frost-bitten; and by sheer force of character, she managed to convince the despairing lover that a frost-bitten potato was a more substantial fact than a broken heart.

"I declar' if the last one of 'em ain't specked! I knew 'twould be so when they was left out thar in the smoke-house that cold spell. Abel, all those sweet potatoes you left out in the smoke-house have been nipped."

"Well, I don't care a hang!" retorted Abel, as he unwrapped his muffler. "If it isn't one thing, it's another. You're enough to drive a sober man to drink."

"If you don't care, I'd like to know who ought to," responded Sarah, whose principal weapon in an argument was the fact that she was always the injured person. "It seems that 'twas all yo' fault since you put 'em thar."

"You'd better give him some supper — he looks almost played out," observed Abner from a corner of the hearth, where he sat smoking with his head hanging on his chest.

Though she might harrow her son's soul, Sarah was incapable of denying him food, so rising from her knees, she unpinned her skirt, and brought him coffee and broiled herring from the stove where they had been keeping hot.

"Where's Archie?" asked Abel, while she plied him with corn muffins.

"Courtin', I reckon, though he'd best be down yonder in the swamp settin' those old hare traps. I never saw sech courtin' as you all's anyhow," she concluded. "It don't seem to lead nowhar, nor to end in nothin' except itself. That's what this here everlastin' education has done for you, Abel — if you hadn't had those books to give you something to think about, you'd have been married an' settled a long time befo' now. Yo' grandpa over thar was steddyin' about raisin' a family before he was twenty."

On either side of the stove, grandfather and grandmother nodded like an ancient Punch and Judy who were at peace only when they slept. Grandfather's pipe had gone out in his hand, and from grandmother's lap a ball of crimson yarn had rolled on the rag carpet before the fire. Twenty years ago she had begun knitting an enormous coverlet in bright coloured squares, and it was still unfinished, though the strips, packed away in camphor, filled a chest in Sarah's store closet.

"You wouldn't like any girl I'd marry," he retorted with a feeble attempt at mirth. "If I tried to put your advice into practice there'd be trouble as sure as shot."

"No, thar wouldn't — not if I picked her out," she returned.

"Great Scott! Won't you let me choose my own wife even?" he exclaimed, with a laugh in which there was an ironic humour. The soft pressure of Molly's fingers was still on his hand, and he saw her face looking up at him, gentle and beseeching, as she had looked when she offered her lips to his kiss. Above the yearning of his heart there rose now the decision of his judgment — and this had surrendered her to Mr. Mullen! Some rigid strain of morality, inherited from Sarah and therefore continually at war with her, caused him to torture himself into a mental recognition that her choice was for the best.

"That man never walked that had sense enough to pick out a wife," rejoined Sarah. "To think of a great hulkin' fellow like you losin' yo' sense over a half mad will-o'-the-wisp that don't even come of decent people. If she hadn't had eyes as big as saucers, do you reckon you'd ever have turned twice to look at her?"

"For God's sake don't talk about her — she's not going to marry me," he responded, and the admission of the truth he had so often repeated in his own mind caused a pang of disbelief.

"I'd like to know why she ain't?" snorted Sarah indignantly, "does she think she's goin' to get a better catch in this neighbourhood?"

"Oh, it's all one. She doesn't want to, that is enough."

"Well, she's a fool if she doesn't want to, an' I'll say it to her face. If thar's a better lookin' man around here, I'd like to see him, or a better worker. What have the Merryweathers to be so set up about, I'd like to know? And that gal without even a father to her name that she can call her own!"

"You mustn't — I won't stand it any longer."

"Well, it's for yo' good, I reckon. If yo' own mother can't take yo' side, I'd like to know who's goin' to do it?"

"I don't want anybody to take my side. She's got a right not to marry me."

"I ain't sayin' she ain't, an' it's a mighty good thing for you that she's sech a plum fool as not to want to. 'Twould be the worst news I'd ever heard if she'd been minded to have you. I'd move heaven an' earth to keep you from marryin' her, an' if the good Lord has done it instead of me, I'm thankful enough to Him for His trouble."

Rising from the table, Abel pushed his untasted food aside with a gesture of loathing. A week ago he had been interested in the minor details of life; to-night he felt that they bored him profoundly.

"If you knew what you were saying you'd hold your tongue," he retorted angrily.

"Ain't you goin' to eat yo' supper?" inquired Sarah anxiously, "that herrin' is real nice and brown."

"I don't want anything. I'm not hungry."

"Mebbe you'd like one of the brandied peaches I'm savin' for Christmas?"

"No, I'm dead beat. I'll go up to sleep pretty soon."

"Do you want a fire? I can lay one in a minute."

He shook his head, not impatiently, but as one to whom brandied peaches and wood fires are matters of complete indifference.

"I've got to see about something in the stable first. Then I'll go to bed."

Taking down a lantern from a nail by the door, he went out, as was his nightly habit, to look at his grey mare Hannah. When he came in again and stumbled up the narrow staircase to his room, he found that Sarah had been before him and kindled a blaze from resinous pine on the two bricks in the fireplace. At the sound of his step, she entered with an armful of pine boughs, which she tossed to the flames.

"I reckon the cracklin' will make you feel mo' comfortable," she observed. "Thar ain't anything like a lightwood fire to drive away the misery."

"It does sound friendly," he responded.

For a moment she hesitated, groping apparently for some topic of conversation which would divert his mind from the one subject that engrossed him.

"Archie's just come in," she remarked at last, "an' he walked up with old Uncle Toby, who said he'd seen a ha'nt in the dusk over at Poplar Spring. I don't see how Mrs. Gay an' Miss Kesiah can endure to live thar."

"Oh, they're just darkies' tales — nobody believes in them any more than in conjuring and witches."

"That's true, I reckon, but I shouldn't like to live over thar all the same. They say old Mr. Jonathan comes out of his grave and walks whenever one of 'em is to be buried or married."

"Nobody's dead that I've heard of, and I don't suppose either Mr. Jonathan or Miss Kesiah are thinking of getting married."

"Well, I s'pose so — but I'm mighty glad he ain't taken the notion to walk around here. I don't believe in ha'nts, but I ain't got no use for 'em."

She went out, closing the door after her; and dropping into a chair by the fire, he buried his face in his hands, while he vowed in his heart that he would stop thinking of Molly.

CHAPTER XIII

BY THE MILL-RACE

A WARM, though hazy, sun followed the sharp night, and only the blackened and damaged plants in the yard bore witness to the frost, which had melted to the semblance of rain on the grass. On the dappled boughs of the sycamore by the mill-race several bronze leaves hung limp and motionless, as if they were attached by silken threads to the stems, and the coating of moss on the revolving wheel shone like green enamel on a groundwork of ebony. The white mist, which had wrapped the landscape at dawn, still lay in the hollows of the pasture, from which it floated up as the day advanced to dissolve in shining moisture upon the hillside. There was a keen autumn tang in the air — a mingling of rotting leaves, of crushed winesaps, of drying sassafras. As Abel passed from the house to the mill, his gaze rested on a golden hickory tree near the road, where a grey squirrel sported merrily under the branches. Like most of his neighbours, he had drawn his weather predictions from the habits of wild creatures, and had decided that it would be an open winter because the squirrels had left the larger part of the nuts ungarnered.

At the door of the mill, as he turned the big rusty key in the lock, he told himself doggedly that since he was not to have Molly, the only sensible thing was to surrender the thought of her. While he started a blaze in the stove, and swept the floor with the broom-sedge broom he kept for the purpose, he forced his mind to dwell on the sacks of grist that stood ready for grinding. The fox-hound puppy, Moses, had followed him from the house, and sat now suspiciously watching a robin that hopped warily in the band of sunlight over the threshold. The robin was in search of a few grains of buckwheat which had dropped from a measure, and the puppy had determined that, although he was unable to eat the buckwheat himself, he would endeavour to prevent the robin from doing so. So intent was he upon this resolve, that he forgot to bark at an old negro, who drove up presently in an ancient gig, the harness of which was tied on a decrepit mule with pieces of rope. The negro had left some corn to be ground, and as he took his sack of meal from the miller, he let fall a few lamentations on the general forlorn state of human nature.

"Dish yer livin' is moughty hard, marster, but I reckon we'se all got ter come ter hit."

"Well, you manage to raise a little good corn anyway, so you ought to be thankful instead of complaining."

"Dar ain' nuttin' 'tall ter be thankful fur in dat, suh, case de Lawd He ain' had no mo' ter do wid dat ar co'n den ole Marse Hawtrey way over yonder at Pipin' Tree. I jes' ris dat ar co'n wid my own han' right down de road at my f'ont do', an' po'd de water on hit outer de pump at my back un. I'se monst'ous glad ter praise de Lawd fur what He done done, but I ain' gwine ter gin 'im credit fur de wuk er my own fis' en foot."

"Are you going by Jordan's Journey, uncle? I'd like to send Reuben Merryweather's buckwheat to him."

"Naw, boss, I ain't a-gwine by dar, caze dat ar Jerdan's Jerney ain got a good name ter my years. I ain't a-feared er ha'nts by daylight, but I'se monst'ous feared er badness day er nightime, en hit sutney do pear ter me like de badness er ole Marse Jonathan done got in de a'r er dat ar Jerdan's Jerney. Hit's ha'nted by badness, dat's what 'tis, en dar ain nobody cep'n Gawd A'moughty Hisse'f dat kin lay badness."

He went out, stooping under the weight of his bag, and picking up a grey turkey's wing from the ledge, Abel began brushing out the valve of the mill, in which the meal had grown heavy from dampness.

"The truth is, Moses," he remarked, "you are a fool to want what you can't have in this life." The puppy looked up at him inquiringly, its long ears flapping about its soft foolish face. "But I reckon we're all fools, when it comes to that."

When the grinding was over for the day, he shut down the mill, and calling Moses to heel, went out on the old mill-race, where the upper gate was locked by a crude wooden spar known as the "key." He was standing under the sycamore, with this implement in his hand, when he discerned the figure of Molly approaching slowly amid the feathery white pollen which lay in patches of delicate bloom over the sorrel waste of the broomsedge. Without moving he waited until she had crossed the log and stood looking up at him from the near side of the stream.

"Abel, are you still angry with me?" she asked, smiling.

Dropping the key into the lock, he walked slowly to the end of the mill-race, and descended the short steps to the hillside.

"No, I'm not angry — at least I don't think I am — but I've taken your advice and given you up."

"But, Abel ——"

"I suppose you meant to take Mr. Mullen all the time that you were making a fool of me. He's a better man for you, probably, than I am."

"Do you really think that?" she asked in a tone of surprise. "Would you like to see me married to him?"

He hesitated an instant and then answered: "I honestly believe that it is the best thing for you to do."

Instead of producing the effect he had foreseen, his advice brought a luminous moisture to her eyes.

"I suppose you think it would do me good to be preached to three times a day?" she rejoined.

"Well, I believe it wouldn't hurt you, Molly," he responded with a smile.

His attitude of renouncement drew her suddenly nearer.

"It wasn't about Mr. Mullen that I came to talk to you — there is something else."

"Surely you aren't thinking of Jim Halloween?"

"No, no, it isn't a man. Why do you seem to think that the beginning and middle and end of my existence is a man? There are times when I find even a turkey more interesting."

"It is about a turkey, then, that you have come to see me?"

"Oh, no, it's a man, after all, but not a lover — he's Mr. Chamberlayne, the lawyer, from Applegate. Yesterday when he was spending the day at the big house, he came over to see me."

"Had he never seen you before?"

"Of course, when I was little — and later he took me to school in Applegate. I was to stay there until I was twenty-one you know, but I ran away the second year because grandfather fell ill with pneumonia and there was no one to look after him. You remember that, don't you?"

"Yes, I remember. I picked you up on the road and brought you home in my gig. There was a heavy snow storm."

"It seems that I was meant to be educated as a lady. Old Mr. Jonathan left a letter about it."

"He did? — damn him! Why didn't he save himself the trouble by acting decently in the beginning?"

"That was because of Mrs. Gay — he had promised her, when he thought she was dying, some dreadful thing. And after that he was afraid — afraid of her all his life. Isn't it terrible that such a saintly person should have caused so much sin?"

"But what was she to him that he should have been such a coward about her?"

"Oh, he loved her more than anything on earth — for he loved my mother only a little while. When Mrs. Gay first came to live with him, she was so beautiful and so delicate, that she looked as if a wind would blow her away — so soft that she could smother a person like a mass of feathers. He felt after that that he had entangled himself, and it was only at the last when he was dying that he had any remorse. With all his wickedness there was a terrible kind of religion in him — like a rock that is buried under the earth — and he wanted to save his soul alive before he passed on to judgment. As if *that* did any good — or he *could* make amends either to me or to God."

"I rather hope he was as unsuccessful in the last case as in the first. But, tell me, Molly, how does it affect you?"

"Not at all — not at all — if he has left me money, I shall not touch it. He wasn't thinking of mother, but of his own soul at the end, and can you tell me that God would wipe out all his dreadful past just because of one instant's fear?"

Her passion, so unlike the meekness of Janet Merryweather, made him look at her wonderingly, and yet with a sympathy that kept him dumb. It took the spirit of a Gay to match a Gay, he thought, not without bitterness.

"But why does Mr. Chamberlayne come to you now?" he asked, when he had regained his voice.

"It is Mrs. Gay — it has always been Mrs. Gay ever since Mr. Jonathan first saw her. She smothered his soul with her softness, and wound him about her little finger when she appeared all the time too weak to lift her hand. That's just what men think women ought to be — just the kind Mr. Mullen preaches about in his sermons — the kind that rules without your knowing it. But if she'd been bold and bad instead of soft and good, she couldn't have done half the harm!"

"And Miss Kesiah?" he asked, "had she nothing to do with it?"

"She? Oh, her sister has drained her — there isn't an ounce of red blood left in her veins. Mr. Jonathan never liked her because she is homely, and she had no influence over him. Mrs. Gay ruled him."

"I always thought her so lovely and gentle," he said regretfully, "she seems to me so much more womanly than Miss Kesiah."

"I suppose she is as far as her face goes, and that's what people judge by. If you part your hair and look a certain way nothing that you can do will keep them from thinking you an angel. When I smile at Mr. Mullen in church it convinces him that I like visiting the sick."

"How can you laugh at him, Molly, if you are going to marry him?"

"Have you positively decided," she inquired, "that I am going to marry him?"

"Wasn't that what you meant when you threw me over?"

She shook her head, "No, it wasn't what I meant — but since you've made up your mind, I suppose there's no use for me to say a word?"

"On the whole I don't think there is — for your words are not honest ones."

"Then why do you judge me by them, Abel?" she asked very softly.

"Because a man must judge by something and I can't look into your heart. But if I'm not to be your lover," he added, "I'll not be your plaything. It's now or never."

"Why, Abel!" she exclaimed in mock astonishment.

"It's the last time I shall ever ask you — Molly, will you marry me?"

"You've forgotten poor Mr. Mullen."

"Hang Mr. Mullen! I shall ask you just three times, and the third will be the last — Now, Molly will you marry me? That's the second."

"But it's so sudden, Abel."

"If ten years can't prepare you, ten minutes will be no better. Here goes the third and last, Molly ——"

"Abel, how *can* you be so silly?"

"That's not an answer — will you —— "

"Do you mean if I don't promise now, I'll never have the chance again?"

"I've told you — listen —— "

"Oh, wait a minute. Please, go slowly."

" — Marry me?"

"Abel, I don't believe you love me!" she said, and began to sob.

"Answer me and I'll show you."

"I didn't think you'd be so cruel — when —— "

"When? Remember I've stopped playing, Molly."

"When you know I'm simply dying for you," she responded.

He smiled at her without moving. "Then answer my question, and there's no drawing back this time remember."

"The question you asked me? Repeat it, please."

"I've said it three times already, and that's enough."

"Must I put it into words? Oh Abel, can't you see it?"

Lifting her chin, he laughed softly as he stooped and kissed her. "I've seen it several times before, darling. Now I want it put into words — just plain ones."

"Then, Mr. Abel Revercomb," she returned demurely, "I should like very much to marry you, if you have no objection."

The next instant her mockery fled, and in one of those spells of sadness, which seemed so alien to her, and yet so much a part of her, she clung to him, sobbing.

"Abel, I love you so, be good to me," she entreated.

"Good to you!" he exclaimed, crushing her to him.

"Oh, those dreadful days since we quarrelled!"

"Why did you do it, darling, since you suffered as well as I?"

"I can't tell — there's something in me like that, I don't know what it is — but we'll quarrel again after this, I suppose."

"Then we deserve to be punished and I hope we shall be."

"How will that help? It's just life and we can't make it different." She drew gently away from him, while a clairvoyance wiser than her years saddened her features. "I wonder if love ever lasts?" she whispered half to herself.

But there was no room in his more practical mind for the question. "Ours will, sweetheart — how can you doubt it? Haven't I loved you for the last ten years, not counting the odd days?"

"And in all those years you kissed me once, while in the last five minutes you've kissed me — how many times? You are wasteful, Abel."

"And you're a dreadful little witch — not a woman."

"I suppose I am, and a nice girl wouldn't talk like this. I'm not the wife you're wanting, Abel."

"The first and last and only one, my darling."

"Judy Hatch would suit you better if she wasn't in love with the rector."

"Confound Judy Hatch! I'll stop your mouth with kisses if you mention her again."

At this she clung to him, laughing and crying in a sudden passion of fear.

"Hold me fast, Abel, and don't let me go, whatever happens," she said.

When he had parted from her at the fence which divided his land from Gay's near the Poplar Spring, he watched her little figure climb the Haunt's Walk and then disappear into the leafless shrubbery at the back of the house. While he looked after her it seemed to him that the wan November day grew radiant with colour, and that spring blossomed suddenly, out of season, upon the landscape. His hour was upon him when he turned and retraced his steps over the silver brook and up the gradual slope, where the sun shone on the bare soil and revealed each separate clod of earth as if it were seen under a microscope. All nature was at one with him. He felt the flowing of his blood so joyously that he wondered why the sap did not rise and mount upward in the trees.

In the yard Sarah was directing a negro boy, who was spreading a second layer of manure over her more delicate plants. As Abel closed the gate, she looked up, and the expression of his face held her eyes while he came toward her.

"What has happened, Abel? You look like Moses when he came down from the mountain."

"It was all wrong — what I told you last night, mother. Molly is going to marry me."

"You mean she's gone an' changed her mind jest as you'd begun to git along without her. I declar', I don't know what has got into you to show so little sperit. If you were the man I took you to be, you'd up an' let her see quick enough that you don't ax twice in the same quarter."

"Oh, all that's over now — she's going to marry me."

"You needn't shout so. I ain't deaf. Samson, sprinkle another spadeful of manure on that bridal-wreath bush over thar by the porch."

"Won't you say you're pleased?"

"I ain't pleased, Abel, an' I ain't going to lie about it. When I git down on my knees to-night, I'll pray harder than I ever prayed in my life that you'll come to yo' senses an' see what a laughing-stock that gal has made of you."

"Then I wish I hadn't told you."

"Well, I'd have knowed it anyhow — it's burstin' out of you. Where're you goin' now? The time's gittin' on toward dinner."

"For my axe. I want to cut a little timber."

"What on earth are you goin' to cut timber at this hour for?"

"Oh, I feel like it, that's all. I want to try my strength."

Going into the kitchen, he came out a minute later with his axe on his shoulder. As he crossed the log over the mill-stream, the spotted fox-hound puppy waddled after him, and several startled rabbits peered out from a clump of sassafras by the "worm" fence. Over the fence went Abel, and under it, on his fat little belly, went Moses, the puppy. In the meadow the life-everlasting shed a fragrant pollen in the sunshine, and a few crippled grasshoppers deluded themselves into the belief that the summer still lingered. Once the puppy tripped over a love-vine, and getting his front paws painfully entangled yelped sharply for assistance. Picking him up, Abel carried him in his arms to the pine wood, where he placed him on a bed of needles in a hollow.

Through the slender boles of the trees, the sunlight fell in bars on the carpet of pine-cones. The scent of the living forest was in his nostrils, and when he threw back his head, it seemed to him that the blue sky was resting upon the tree-tops. Taking off his coat, he felt the edge of his blade, while he leaned against the great pine he had marked out for sacrifice. In the midst of the wood he saw the walls of his house rising—saw the sun on the threshold—the smoke mount from the chimney. The dream in his brain was the dream of the race in its beginning—for he saw the home and in the centre of the home he saw a woman and in the arms of the woman he saw a child. Though the man would change, the dream was indestructible, and would flow on from the future into the future. The end it served was not individual, but racial — for it belonged not to the soul of the lover, but to the integral structure of life.

Moving suddenly, as if in response to a joyous impulse, he drew away from the tree, and lifting his axe swung it out into the sunlight. For an instant there was silence. Then a shiver shook the pine from its roots upward, the boughs rocked in the blue sky, and a bird flying out of them sailed slowly into the west.

CHAPTER XIV

SHOWS THE WEAKNESS IN STRENGTH

WHEN Abel had gone, Sarah folded her grey woollen shawl over her bosom, and ordered the boy with the wheelbarrow to return to the barnyard. Left alone her eyes followed her son's figure as it divided the broomsedge in the meadow, but from the indifference of her look she might have gazed on the pine tree toward which he was moving. A little later, when her glance passed to the roof of the mill there was no perceptible change in her expression; and she observed dispassionately that the shingles which caught the drippings from the sycamore were beginning to rot. While she stood there she was in the throes of one of the bitterest sorrows of her life; yet there was no hint of it either in her quiet face or in the rigid spareness of her figure. Her sons had resisted her at times, but until to-day not one of them had rebelled openly against her authority in the matter of marriage. Years ago, in the period of Abner's reaction from a blighted romance, she had chosen, without compunction, a mild-mannered, tame-spirited maiden for his wife. Without compunction, when the wedding was over, she had proceeded, from the best possible motives, to torment the tame-spirited maiden into her grave.

"He's layin' up misery for himself and for all concerned," she said aloud, after a moment, "a girl like that with no name and precious little religion — an idle, vain, silly hussy, with a cropped head!"

A small coloured servant, in a girl's pinafore and a boy's breeches, came to the door, and whispered that the old people were demanding a snack of bread and molasses.

"Tell 'em it ain't the day for sweets an' they ain't goin' to have any," replied Sarah sternly. "Thar's a meat dinner to-day, an' I've made 'em a good soup out of the bones. You know, pa an' ma, that you ain't goin' to have meat an' molasses the same day," she remarked as she entered the kitchen. "If I didn't watch you every minute, you'd make yo'selves sick with overeatin'."

"I reckon you're right, Sary," piped grandfather in angry tones, "but I ain't so sure I wouldn't rather have the sickness than the watchin'. It's hard on a man of my years an' experience that he shouldn't be allowed to project with his own stomach."

"You'd have been dead long ago but for me, an' you ought to be ashamed of yo'self for talkin' such foolishness. As if I hadn't wo' myself out with waitin' on you, an' no blood relation."

"No blood relation!" chimed in grandmother maliciously, "no blood relation!"

"Well, you hurry up an' get ready for dinner, for I'm goin' out afterwards."

"Whar on earth are you goin', Sary? It ain't Sunday."

"It don't matter to you whar I'm goin' — you jest set right up an' eat yo' soup."

When she had poured the contents of the pot into the two earthenware bowls, she crumbled a piece of bread into each, and gave the dinner into the trembling hands which were stretched out eagerly to receive it. Then taking the red-and-white cloth from the cupboard, she set the table for five, and brought the dish of turnips and boiled beef from the stove. Every detail was as carefully attended to as if her thoughts were not on the hillside with Abel, but she herself could not eat so much as a mouthful. A hard lump rose in her throat and prevented her swallowing.

The men did not appear, so leaving their dinner in the stove, she went upstairs and put on her black poke bonnet and the alpaca mantle trimmed with bugles which she wore on Sundays and on the occasional visits to her neighbours. As it was her custom never to call without bearing tribute in the form of fruit or preserves, she placed a jar of red currant jelly into a little basket, and started for her walk, holding it tightly in her black worsted gloves. She knew that if Molly divined her purpose she would hardly accept the gift, but the force of habit was too strong for her, and she felt that she could not start out to make a visit with empty hands.

Her chief anxiety was to be gone before Abel should return, and for this reason she left the house by the back door, and chose the small, descending path that led through the willows to Jordan's Journey. As she neared the brook a bow of blue ribbon hanging on a branch caught her eye, and she recognized a bit of the trimming from Blossom's Sunday dress. Releasing it from the tree, she put it into her pocket, with the resolve that she would reprove her granddaughter for wearing her best clothes in such unsuitable places. Then her thoughts returned to the immediate object of her visit, and she told herself sternly that she would let Molly Merryweather know her opinion of her while there was yet time for the girl to withdraw from the marriage. That she was wronging her son by exerting such despotic authority was the last thought that would have occurred to her. A higher morality than that of ordinary mortals had guided her in the past, and she followed it now.

When she reached the rail fence, she found some difficulty in climbing it, since her legs had grown rheumatic with the cold weather; but by letting the basket down first on a forked stick, she managed to ease herself gently over to the opposite side. Here she rested, while she carefully brushed away the dried pollen from the golden-rod, which was staining her dress. Then regaining her strength after a minute, she pushed on under the oak trees, where the moist, dead leaves made a soft, velvety sound, to the apple orchard and the sunken flagged walk that led to the overseer's cottage.

In the sunshine on the porch Reuben Merryweather was sitting; and at sight of his visitor, he rose, with a look of humble surprise, and invited her into the house. His manner toward her was but a smaller expression of his mental attitude to the universe. That he possessed any natural rights as an individual had never occurred to him; and the humility with which he existed gave place only to the mild astonishment which filled him at any recognition of that existence by man or Providence.

"Walk in an' sit down, ma'am," he said hospitably leading the way into the little sitting-room, where the old hound dozed on the rug. "Molly's jest gone down to the spring-house, but she'll be back in a minute."

"Reuben Merryweather —" began Sarah, and then she stopped, "you ain't lookin' over sprightly," she said after a pause.

"I've got a weak chest, an' the cold settles on it."

"Did you ever try mutton suet laid over it on a piece of red flannel? 'Tis the best cure I know of."

"Molly makes me a plaster for it at night." The feeling that he had engrossed the conversation for his selfish ends led him to remark after a minute, "You have changed but little, Sarah, a brave woman you are."

"Not so brave, Reuben, but I'm a believer an' that helps me. I'd have broken down under the burden often enough if my faith hadn't supported me. You've had yo' troubles, too, Reuben, an' worse ones."

"It's true, it's true," said the old man, coughing behind his hand, "to see my po' gal suffer so was worst — but however bad things seemed to us on top, I've al'ays believed thar was a hidden meanin' in 'em that our eyes couldn't see."

"Ah, you were al'ays a soft natured man, Reuben, too soft natured for yo' own good, I used to think."

"'Twas that that stood against me with you, Sarah, when we were young. Do you remember the time you refused to drive back with me from that picnic at Falling Creek because I wouldn't give Jacob Bumpass a hiding about something? That was a bitter pill to me, an' I've never forgot it."

Sarah had flushed a little, and her stern face appeared to have grown ten years younger. "To think that you ain't forgot all that old foolishness, Reuben!"

"Well, thar's been time enough an' trouble enough, no doubt," he answered, "but seein' you lookin' so like yo' old self put me in mind of it."

"Lord, Reuben, I ain't thought of all that for forty years!"

"No mo' have I, Sarah, except when I see you on Sundays sittin' across the church from me. You were a beauty in yo' day, though some folks use to think that that little fair thing, Mary Hilliard, was better lookin'. To me 'twas like settin' a dairy maid beside a queen."

"Even my husband thought Mary Hilliard, was prettier," said Sarah, and her tone showed that this tribute to her youthful vanity had touched her heart.

"Well, I never did. You were al'ays too good for me an' I never begrudged you to Abner. He was a better man."

For an instant she looked at him steadily, while living honesty struggled in her bosom against loyalty to the dead.

"No, Reuben, Abner was not a better man," she said presently, as if the words were thrust out of her by a chastening conscience. "My pride kept me up after I had married him; but he was born shiftless an' he died shiftless. He never did a day's work in his life that I didn't drive him to. His children have never known how it was, for I've al'ays made 'em think he was a hard worker an' painstakin' to keep back his laziness from croppin' out in 'em, if I could."

"You've brought 'em up well. That's a fine son of yours that comes courtin' my gal, Sarah. I've hoped she'd fancy him for the sake of old times."

"I never thought of yo' recollectin' that feelin', Reuben. It makes me feel almost young again, an' I that old an' wo' out. I've had a hard life — thar's no disputin' it, marriage is mostly puttin' up with things, I reckon, when it ain't makin' believe."

"Thar's mighty few that gits the one that's meant for 'em," said Reuben, "that's sure enough. If we did we'd stop movin' forward, I suppose, an' begin to balk. I haven't much life now, except in Molly, an' it's the things that please or hurt her that I feel the most. She's got a warm heart an' a hot temper like you used to have, Sarah, an' the world ain't easy generally to yo' sort."

For a time Sarah was silent, her hands in their black woollen gloves gripping the handle of the basket.

"Well, I must be goin', Reuben," she said presently, rising from her chair. "I'm sorry about yo' chest, an' I jest stepped over to bring you this glass of currant jelly I made last summer. It goes well with meat when yo' appetite ain't hearty."

She held out her hand, shook his with a hurried and awkward movement, and went out of the front door and down the flagged walk as Molly's steps were heard in the kitchen at the back.

"Sarah Revercomb has been here, honey," said Reuben. "She brought me over this glass of currant jelly, and said she was sorry to miss you."

"Why, what could she have meant?" asked Molly. "She hates me and she knows I've never liked her."

"Like most folks it ain't Sarah but the way you take her that matters. We've all got the split somewhar in our shell if you jest know how to find it. I reckon she's given in about Abel an' came over to show it."

"I'm glad she brought you the jelly, and perhaps she is getting softer with age," rejoined Molly, still puzzled.

"Don't worry, honey, she's a good woman at bottom, but mortal slow of larnin', and thar's a lot of Sarah in that boy of hers."

"I suppose there is, grandfather, for all their fierce quarrelling. They have the kind of love that will die for you and yet will not so much as suffer you to live. That's the way Mrs. Revercomb loves, and it's the way Abel is loving me now."

"Let him larn, pretty, let him larn. He'll be worth twice as much at fifty as he is to-day, an' so will you for that matter. They're fools that say love is for the young, Molly, don't you believe 'em."

Sarah, meanwhile, passed slowly down the flagged walk under the gnarled old apple trees in the orchard. A few heavy-winged insects, awaking from the frost of the night, droned over the piles of crushed winesaps, and she heard the sound as though it came to her across a distance of forty years. They were not easy years; she was worn by their hardness, crippled by their poverty, embittered by their sorrows. "I've had a hard life," she thought. "I've had a hard life, an' it warn't fair." For the first time it occurred to her that the Providence she had served had not used her honourably in return. "Even Abner al'ays thought that Mary Hilliard was the prettiest," she added, after a minute.

As she crossed the lawn at Jordan's Journey, Uncle Abednego, the butler, appeared at the back door, and detained her with an excited wave of the hand.

"Lawd A'moughty, dar's bad times yer, Miss Sary!" he cried, "Miss Angela she's been mos' dead fur goin' on two hours, en we all's done sont Cephus on de bay horse arter Marse Jonathan!"

CHAPTER XV

SHOWS THE TYRANNY OF WEAKNESS

THREE days later the bay horse returned at a gallop with Jonathan Gay in the saddle. At the head of the steps Kesiah was standing, and she answered the young man's anxious questions with a manner which she tried to make as sympathetic as the occasion required. This effort to adjust her features into harmony with her feelings had brought her brows together in a forbidding scowl and exaggerated the harsh lines between mouth and chin.

"Am I in time?" he asked in a trembling voice, and his hand reached out to her for support.

"The immediate danger is over, Jonathan," she answered, while she led him into the library and closed the door softly behind them. "For hours we despaired of her recovery, but the doctors say now that if there is no other shock, she may live on for months."

"I got your note last night in Washington," he returned. "It was forwarded by mail from Applegate. Is the doctor still with her?"

"No, he has just gone. The rector is there now. She finds him a great comfort."

"It was so sudden, Aunt Kesiah — she appeared well when I left her. What caused the attack?"

"A talk she had had with Mr. Chamberlayne. It seems he thought it best to prepare her for the fact that your Uncle Jonathan left a good deal of his property — it amounts to an income of about ten thousand a year, I believe, to Reuben Merryweather's granddaughter when she comes of age. Of course it wasn't the money — Angela never gave that a thought — but the admission that the girl was his illegitimate daughter that struck so heavy a blow."

"But surely she must have suspected —— "

"She has never suspected anything in her life. It is a part of her sweetness, you know, that she never faces an unpleasant fact until it is literally thrust on her notice. As long as your uncle was so devoted to her and so considerate, she thought it a kind of disloyalty to inquire as to the rest of his life. Once I remember, twenty years ago, when that poor distraught creature came to me — I went straight to Angela and tried to get her to use her influence with your uncle for the girl's sake. But at the first hint, she locked herself in her room and refused to let me come near her. Then it was that I had that terrible quarrel with Mr. Gay, and he hardly spoke to me again as long as he lived. I believe, though, he would have married Janet after my talk with him except for Angela's illness, which was brought on by the shock of hearing him speak of his intention." She sighed wonderingly, her anxious frown deepening between her eyebrows. "They both seemed to think that in some way I was to blame for the whole thing," she added, "and your uncle never forgave me. It's the same way now. Mr. Chamberlayne spoke quite angrily to me when he saw the effect of his interview. He appeared to think that I ought to have prevented it."

"Could it have been kept from her, do you suppose?"

"That looked impossible, and, of course, he broke it to her very gently. He also, you know, has all his life had a sentiment about Angela, and that, I think is why he never married. He told me once that she came nearer than any woman he had ever seen to representing every man's ideal."

"What I can't understand is why she should have been so upset by the discovery?"

"Well, she was very fond of your uncle, and she has cherished quite romantically the memory of his affection for her. I think — for that is Angela's way — that he means much more to her dead than he did living — and this, she says, has blackened his image."

"But even then it seems incomprehensible that it should have made her really so ill."

"Oh, you don't know her yet, Jonathan. I remember your uncle used to say that she was more like a flower than a woman, and he was always starting alarms about her health. We lived in a continual panic about her for several years, and it was her weakness, as much as her beauty, that gave her her tremendous power over him. He was like wax in her hands, though of course he never suspected it."

The tread of Mr. Mullen was heard softly on the staircase, and he entered with his hand outstretched from the starched cuff that showed beneath the sleeve of his black broadcloth coat. Pausing on the rug, he glanced from Kesiah to Jonathan with a grave and capable look, as though he wished them to understand that, having settled everything with perfect satisfaction in the mind of Mrs. Gay, he was now ready to perform a similar office for the rest of the household.

"I am thankful to say that I left your dear mother resting peacefully," he observed in a whisper. "You must have had a distressing journey, Mr. Gay?"

"I was very much alarmed," replied Gay, with a nervous gesture as if he were pushing aside a disagreeable responsibility. "The note took three days to find me, and I didn't know until I got here whether she was alive or dead."

"It is easy to understand your feelings," returned the rector, still whispering though Gay had spoken in his natural voice. "Such a mother as yours deserves the most careful cherishing that you can give her. To know her has been an inspiration, and I am never tired of repeating that her presence in the parish, and occasional attendance at church, are privileges for which we should not forget to be thankful. It is not possible, I believe, for any woman to approach more closely the perfect example of her sex."

"Perhaps I had better go up to her at once. We are deeply grateful to you, Mr. Mullen, for your sympathy."

"Who would not have felt?" rejoined the other, and taking up his hat from the table, he went out, still treading softly as though he were walking upon something he feared to hurt.

"Poor mother! It's wonderful the way she has with people!" exclaimed Gay, turning to Kesiah.

"She's always had it with men — there's something so appealing about her. You'll be very careful what you say to her, Jonathan."

"Oh, I'll not confess my sins, if that's what you mean," he responded as he ascended the staircase.

The room was fragrant with burning cedar, and from the dormer-windows, latticed by boughs, a band of sunlight stretched over the carpet to the high white bed in which his mother was lying. Her plaintive blue eyes, which clung to him when he entered, appeared to say; "Yes, see how they have hurt me — a poor frail creature." Above her forehead her hair, which was going grey, broke into a mist, and spread in soft, pale strands over the pillow. Never had her helpless sweetness appealed so strongly to his emotions, as when she laid her hand on his arm and said in an apologetic whisper:

"Dear boy, how I hated to bring you back."

"As if I wouldn't have come from the end of the world, dearest mother," he answered.

He had fallen on his knees by her bed, but when Kesiah brought him a chair, he rose and settled himself more comfortably.

"I wanted you, dear, but if you knew how I dreaded to become a drag on you. Men must be free, I know — never let me interfere with your freedom — I feel such a helpless, burdensome creature."

"If you could only see how young and lovely you look even when you are ill, you would never fear becoming a burden. In spite of your grey hairs, you might pass for a girl at this minute."

"You wicked flatterer! — but, oh, Jonathan, I've had a blow!"

"I understand. It must have been rough."

"And to think how I had always idealized him! — how I had believed in his love for me and cherished his memory! To discover that even at the last — on his deathbed — he was thinking of that woman!"

She wept gently, wiping her eyes with a resigned and suffering gesture on the handkerchief Kesiah had handed her. "I feel as if my whole universe had crumbled," she said.

"But it was no affront to you, mother — it all happened before he saw you, and was only an episode. Those things don't bite into a man's life, you know."

"Of course, I knew there had been something, but I thought he had forgotten it — that he was faithful to his love for me — his spirit worship, he called it. Then to find out so long after his death — when his memory had become a part of my religion — that he had turned back at the end."

"It wasn't turning away from you, it was merely an atonement. Your influence was visible even there."

"I am sorry for the child, of course," she said sadly, after weeping a little —"who knows but she may have inherited her mother's character?"

"The doctor said you were to be quiet, Angela," remarked Kesiah, who had stood at the foot of the bed in the attitude of a Spartan. "Jonathan, if you begin to excite her, you'd better go."

"Oh, my boy, my darling boy," sobbed Mrs. Gay, with her head on his shoulder, "I have but one comfort and that is the thought that you are so different — that you will never shatter my faith in you. If you only knew how thankful I am to feel that you are free from these dreadful weaknesses of other men."

Cowed by her helplessness, he looked down on her with shining eyes.

"Remember the poor devil loved you, mother, and be merciful to his memory," he replied, touched, for the first time, by the thought of his uncle.

"I shall try, Jonathan, I shall try, though the very thought of evil is a distress to me," she replied, with a saintly look. "As for the girl, I have only the tenderest pity for the unfortunate creature."

"That's like you, mother."

"Kesiah says that she has behaved very well. Didn't you say so, Kesiah?"

"Yes, Mr. Chamberlayne told me that she appeared perfectly indifferent when he spoke to her. She even remarked, I believe, that she didn't see that it concerned her."

"Well, she's spirit enough. Now stop talking, mother, I am going."

"God bless you, my darling boy — you have never failed me."

Instead of appeasing his conscience, the remark completed his descent into the state of disenchantment he had been approaching for hours. The shock of his mother's illness, coming after three days of marriage, had been too much for his unstable equilibrium, and he felt smothered by an oppression which, in some strange way, seemed closing upon him from without. It was in the air — in the faded cretonne of the room, in the grey flashes of the swallows from the eaves of the house, in the leafless boughs etched delicately against the orange light of the sky. Like most adventurers of the emotions, he was given to swift despondencies as well as to vivid elations, and the tyranny of a mood was usually as absolute as it was brief. The fact was there while it lasted like the physical sensation of hunger or of gratification. When it departed he seldom spurred his imagination to the pursuit of it.

"So it's over," he said under his breath, as he looked through the lacework of ivy on the small greenish panes to the desolate November fields, "and I've been a damn fool for the asking!"

At the end of the week Blossom returned to the mill, and on the afternoon of her arrival, Gay met her in the willow copse by the brook. To the casual observer there would have appeared no perceptible change in his manner, but a closer student of the hearts of lovers might have drawn an inference from the fact that he allowed her to wait five minutes for him at the place of meeting. True, as he explained passionately, his mother had asked for him just as he was leaving the house, and it was clearly impossible that he should refuse his mother! That he was still ardent for Blossom's embraces was evident to her glance, but the affair was settled, the mystery solved, and there was no longer need that he should torment himself. That the love of his kind is usually a torment or nothing had not, at this stage, occurred to either of the lovers. He was feeling strongly that, having conducted himself in so honourable a manner there was nothing more to be expected of him; while she assured her heart that when his love had proved capable of so gallant a sacrifice, it had established the fact of its immortality. The truth was that the fire still burned, though the obstacles, which had supplied fuel to the flames, were consumed, and a pleasant warmth rather than a destroying blaze was the result. Had Gay sounded the depths of his nature, which he seldom did, he would have discovered that for him passion was a kind of restlessness translated into emotion. When the restlessness was appeased, the desire in which it had revealed itself slowly evaporated.

"How is your mother?" was Blossom's first eager question, "oh, I do hope she is better!"

"Better, yes, but we're still awfully anxious, the least shock may kill her — Aunt Kesiah and I are walking on pins and needles. How are you, Beauty? Did you enjoy your visit?"

He kissed her lips, and she clung to him with the first expression of weakness she had ever shown.

"How could I when it ended like that?"

"Well, you're married anyway — that ought to satisfy you. What does it feel like?"

"I can't believe it — and I haven't even any ring."

"Oh, the ring! If you'd had it, you'd have dropped it about somewhere and let out the secret."

"I wish it had been in church and before a clergyman."

"Are you trying to make me jealous again of the Reverend Orlando? I'm an old married man now, and it is hopeless."

"Do you really feel married, Jonathan?"

"The deuce I don't! If I did I'd be galloping down the turnpike."

"I wonder why you did it?" she questioned a little wistfully, "you take it so lightly."

"I could only take it lightly after I'd done it — that's why, darling."

"If I could believe in it I shouldn't mind the secrecy," she said, "but I feel so wicked and underhand that I hardly dare hold up my head before the folks at home. Jonathan, when do you think we may come out and confess?"

For a moment he did not answer, and she watched the frown gather slowly between his eyebrows.

"There, there, Blossom, don't begin that already," he responded irritably, "we can't make it public as long as my mother lives — that's out of the question. Do you think I could love you if I felt you had forced me to murder her? Heaven knows I've done enough — I've married you fair and square, and you ought to be satisfied."

"I am satisfied," she replied on the point of tears, "but, oh, Jonathan, I'm not happy."

"Then it's your own fault," he answered, still annoyed with her. "You've had everything your own way, and just because I get in trouble and come to you for sympathy, you begin to nag. For God's sake, don't become a nagging woman, Blossom. A man hates her worse than poison."

"O Jonathan!" she cried out sharply, placing her hand on her breast as though he had stabbed her.

"Of course, I'm only warning you. Your great charm is poise—I never saw a woman who had so much of it. That's what a man wants in a wife, too. Vagaries are all right in a girl, but when he marries, he wants something solid and sensible."

"Then you do love me, Jonathan?"

"Don't be a goose," he rejoined — for it was a question to which he had never in his life returned a direct answer.

"Of course, I know you do or you wouldn't have married me — but I wish you'd tell me so — just in words — sometimes."

"If I told you so, you'd have no curiosity left, and that would be bad for you. Come, kiss me, sweetheart, that's better than talking."

She kissed him obediently, as mildly complaisant as she had once been coldly aloof. Though the allurement of the remote had deserted her, she still possessed, in his eyes, the attraction of the beautiful.

If the excitement of the chase was ended, the pleasure of the capture was still amply sufficient to make up the difference. He laughed softly as he kissed her, enjoying her freshness, her surrender, her adoration, which she no longer attempted to hide.

When he parted from her several hours afterwards, he had almost recovered the casual gaiety which had become his habit of mind. Life was too short either to wonder or to regret, he had once remarked, and a certain easy fatalism had softened so far the pricks of a disturbing conscience.

The walk from the pasture to the house led through a tangle of shrubbery called by the negroes, the Haunt's Walk, and as he pushed the leafless boughs out of his way, a flitting glimpse of red caught his eye beyond a turn in the path. An instant later, Molly passed him on her way to the spring or to the meadows beyond.

"Good day, Mr. Jonathan," she said, while her lips curved and she looked up at him with her arch and brilliant smile.

"Good day to yourself, cousin," he responded gaily, "what is your hurry?"

As he made a movement to detain her, she slipped past him, and a minute afterwards her laugh floated back.

"Oh, there's a reason!" she called over her shoulder.

A sudden thought appeared to strike him at her words, and turning quickly in the path, he looked after her until she disappeared down the winding path amid the tangle of shrubbery.

"Jove, she is amazingly pretty!" he said at last under his breath.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COMING OF SPRING

THE winter began in a long rain and ended in a heavy snow which lay for a week over the country. In the chill mornings while she dressed, Molly watched the blue-black shadows of the crows skimming over the white ground, and there was always a dumb anxiety at her heart as she looked after them.

On Christmas Eve there had been a dance at Piping Tree, and because she had danced twice with Gay (who had ridden over in obedience to a whim), Abel had parted from her in anger. For the first time she had felt the white heat of his jealousy, and it had aroused rebellion, not acquiescence, in her heart. Jonathan Gay was nothing to her (though he called her his cousin) — he had openly shown his preference for Blossom — but she insisted passionately that she was free and would dance with whomsoever she pleased. To Abel's demand that she should give up "round dances" entirely, she had returned a defiant and mocking laugh. They had parted in an outburst of temper, to rush wildly together a few days later when they met by chance in the turnpike.

"You love him, but you don't love him enough, honey," said Reuben, patting her head. "You love yourself still better than him."

"Three months ago he hardly dared hope for me — he would have kissed the dust under my feet — and now he flies into fits of jealousy because I dance with another man."

"'Tis human natur to go by leaps an' starts in love, Molly."

"It's a foolish way, grandfather."

"Well, I ain't claimin' that we're over-wise, but thar's al'ays life ready to teach us."

When the snow thawed, spring appeared so suddenly that it looked as if it had lain there all winter in a green and gold powder over the meadows. Flashes of blue, like bits of fallen sky, showed from the rail fences; and the notes of robins fluted up from the budding willows beside the brook. On the hill behind Reuben Merryweather's cottage the peach-trees bloomed, and red-bud and dogwood filled the grey woods with clouds of delicate colour. Spring, which germinated in the earth, moved also, with a strange restlessness, in the hearts of men and women. As the weeks passed, that inextinguishable hope, which mounts always with the rising sap, looked from their faces.

On the morning of her birthday, a warm April day, Molly smiled at herself in the mirror, and because the dimples became her, wondered how she could manage to keep on smiling forever. Blushing and paling she tried a ribbon on her hair, threw it aside, and picked up another.

"I am thankful for many things," she was thinking, "and most of all I am thankful that I am pretty. I suppose it's better to be good like Judy Hatch, but I'd rather be pretty."

She was at the age when the forces of character still lie dormant, and an accident may determine the direction of their future development. It is the age when it is possible for fortune to make a dare-devil of a philosopher, a sceptic of a worshipper, a cynic of a sentimentalist.

When she went down the flagged walk a little later to meet Abel by the blazed pine as she had promised, she was still smiling to herself and to the blue birds that sang joyously in the blossoming trees in the orchard. At the end of the walk her smile vanished for she came face to face with Jim Halloween, who carried a new-born lamb in his arms.

"Many happy returns of the day," he began, with emotion. "I thought a present like this would be the most acceptable I could bring to you — an' ma agreed with me when I asked her advice."

"It's very good of you — and how darling it is! I'll take it back and make it comfortable before I start out."

Taking the lamb into her arms, she hid her face in its wool while they returned to the house.

"It ain't so young as it looks, an' will begin to be peart enough befo' long," he remarked. "Something useful as well as ornamental, was what I had in my mind to bring you. 'Thar's nothin' mo' suitable all round for the purpose than a lamb,' was what I said to ma. 'She can make a pet of it at first, an' then when it gets too big to pet, she can turn it into mutton.'"

"But I wouldn't — I'd never let it be killed — the little darling!"

"Now, that's foolishness, I reckon," he returned admiringly, "but thar's something downright takin' in foolishness as long as a woman is pretty. I don't mind it, an' I don't reckon ma would unless it turned to wastefulness. Is thar' any hope you've changed yo' mind since the last time I spoke about marriage?"

"No, I haven't changed, Mr. Halloween."

He sighed not passionately, but with a resigned and sentimental regret.

"Well, in that case, it's a pity I've wasted so much time wantin' you, I reckon," he rejoined. "It ain't sensible to want what you can't have, an' I've always tried to be sensible, seein' I'm a farmer. If I hadn't set my fancy on you I'd have waited on Blossom Revercomb as likely as not."

They had reached the house, and she did not reply until she had entered the living-room and placed the lamb in a basket. Coming out again, she took up the thread of the conversation as she closed the door behind her.

"I wonder all of you don't turn your eyes on Blossom," she observed.

"Yes, she's handsome enough, but stiff-mouthed and set like all the rest of the Revercombs. I shouldn't like to marry a Revercomb, when it comes to that."

"Shouldn't you?" she asked and laughed merrily.

"They say down at Bottoms," he went on, "that she's gone moonstruck about Mr. Jonathan, an' young Adam Doolittle swears he saw them walkin' together on the other side of old orchard hill."

"I thought she was too sensible a girl for that."

"They're none of 'em too sensible. I'm the only man I ever saw who never had a woman moonstruck about him — an' it makes me feel kind of lonesome to hear the others talk. It's a painful experience, I reckon, but it must be a fruitful source of conversation with a man's wife, if he ever marries. Has it ever struck you," he inquired, "that the chief thing lackin' in marriage is conversation?"

"I don't know — I've never thought about it."

"Now, I have often an' over again, ma bein' sech a silent person to live with. It's the silence that stands between Blossom Revercomb an' me — an' her brother Abel is another glum one of the same sort, isn't he?"

"Do you think so? I hadn't noticed it."

"An' you seein' so much of him! Well, all folks don't observe things as sharply as I do — 'twas a way I was born with. But I passed him at the fork as I came up, an' he was standin' just as solemn an' silent while Mr. Chamberlayne, over from Applegate, was askin' him questions."

"What questions? Did you hear them?"

"Oh, about his mother an' the prospects of the grist-mill. The lawyer went on afterwards to the big house to do business with Mr. Jonathan."

They had reached the point in the road where a bridle path from the mill ran into it; and in the centre of the field, which was woven in faint spring colours like an unfinished tapestry, Molly descried the figure of Abel moving rapidly toward her. Dismissing her companion, she ran forward with her warm blood suffusing her face.

"Abel," she said, "tell me that you are happy," and lifted her mouth for his kiss.

"Something in the spring makes me wild for you, Molly. I can't live without you another year, and hear the blue birds and see the green burst out so sudden. There is a terrible loneliness in the spring, darling."

"But I'm here, Abel."

"Yes, you're here, but you aren't near enough, for I'm never sure of you. That's the cause of it — shall I ever be sure of you even after we are married? You've got different blood in you, Molly — blood that doesn't run quiet, — and it makes me afraid. Do you know I've been to look at the pines this morning, and I am all one big ache to begin on the house."

"But you're happy — say you're happy."

"How can I be happy, when I'm wanting you with every drop of my blood and yet never certain that I shall have you. The devil has a lot to do with it, I reckon — for there are times when I am half blind with jealousy and doubt of you. Did you ever kiss a man before me, Molly?"

She laughed, moved by an instinct to torment him. "You wouldn't have asked me that three months ago, and you wouldn't have cared."

"It's different now. I've got a right to know."

"You'll never know anything because you have the 'right' to," she returned impatiently. "I hate the word — how silly you are, Abel."

"If you'd call me mad you'd come nearer to it, I reckon. It's the way of the Hawtreys — we've always gone neck and crop over the fences without giving a thought to the damage we've done by the way. My mother went like that at religion — she's gone over so hard to religion that she hasn't left a piece of her for common humanity. All the world is divided for her between religion and damnation. I believe she thinks the very eggs in the hen-house are predestined to be saved or damned. And with me it's the same, only it isn't religion, but you. It's all you to me, Molly, even the spring."

"You're so wholehearted, and I'm so light-minded. You ought to have loved a staid, sober woman. I was born passionate and changeful just as you were born passionate and steady."

"Don't, Molly, if you only knew how you hurt me when you talk like that. You've flown into my heart like a little blue bird into a cage, and there you'll beat and flutter, but you can't get out. Some day you'll rest there quiet, sweetheart."

"Don't call it a cage, and never, never try to hold me or I'll fly away."

"Yet you love me, Molly?"

She threw her arms about his neck, rising on tiptoe while she kissed his mouth. "I love you — and yet in my heart I don't really believe in love," she answered. "I shouldn't be surprised to wake up any morning and find that I had dreamed it."

"It makes me want to curse those that put your mind out of joint when you were little and innocent."

"I don't believe I was ever little and innocent — I was born out of bitterness."

"Then I'll cure you, darling. I'll love you so hard that you'll forget all the terrible things you knew as a child."

She shook her head, gaily and yet with a touch of scorn for his assurance. "You may try with all your strength, but when a sapling has been bent crooked you can't pull it straight."

"But you aren't crooked, Molly," he answered, kissing her throat above her open blouse.

She glowed at his kiss, and for one instant, it seemed to them that their spirits touched as closely as their bodies, while the longing and the rapture of spring drew them together.

"You're mine now, Molly — I've got you close," he said as he held her.

At his words the rosy waves upon which they had floated broke suddenly on the earth, and turning slowly they walked hand in hand out of the field into the turnpike. A strange shyness had fallen over them, for when Molly tried to meet his eyes, she found that her lashes trembled and fell; — yet this shyness was as delicious as the ecstasy from which it had come.

But Nature seldom suffers such high moments to pass before they have been paid for in physical values. As the lovers passed into the turnpike, there came the sound of a horse at a trot, and a minute later Jonathan Gay rode toward them, leaning slightly over the neck of his bay. Seeing them, he lifted his hat and brought down his horse to a walk, as if prompted by a sudden desire to look closer in Molly's face. Her rapture evidently became her, for after his first casual glance, he turned again quickly and smiled into her eyes. Her look met his with the frankness of a child's and taken unawares — pleased, too, that he should so openly admire her — she smiled back again with the glow of her secret happiness enriching her beauty.

In a moment Gay had passed on, and turning to Abel, she saw that a frown darkened his features.

"He had no right to look at you like that, and you oughtn't to have smiled back, Molly," he said sternly.

Her nature leaped instantly to arms. "I suppose I've a right to my smiles," she retorted defiantly.

"No you haven't — not now. An engaged woman ought to be proper and sober — anybody will tell you so — ask Mr. Mullen. A girl may flirt a little and nobody thinks any harm of it, but it's different afterwards, and you know it."

"I know nothing of the kind, and I refuse to be preached to. I might as well marry Mr. Mullen."

The taunt, though it was uttered half in jest, appeared to torment him beyond endurance.

"How can you talk to me like this, after what you said five minutes ago?" he demanded.

His tone approached, unfortunately, the ministerial, and as he spoke, her anger flamed over her as hotly as her happiness had done a few moments earlier.

"That was five minutes ago," she retorted with passion.

Stopping in the road, he caught her arms and held them to her sides, while the thunder cloud blackened his forehead. Two playthings of Nature, swept alternately by the calm and the storm of elemental forces, they faced each other in the midst of mating birds and insects that were as free as they.

"Do you mean that you've changed, and in five minutes?" he asked.

"I've always told you I could change in three," she retorted.

"I don't believe it — you are behaving foolishly."

"And you are wise, I suppose — preaching and prating to me as if you stood in the pulpit. When you were begging me so humbly for a kind word, I might have known that as soon as you got the kind word, you'd begin to want to manage me body and soul — that's a man all over."

"I merely said that an engaged woman ought not to smile too free at other men — and that you ought not to even more than others, because there is something so inviting about you. Mr. Mullen would say the same thing from the pulpit — and what one man can say in the pulpit, I reckon, another may repeat in the road."

"No, he mayn't — not if he wants to marry me."

"If I promise not to say a word more about it, will you get over your temper?"

"If you keep your promise, but how am I to know that you won't burst out again the next time I look at a man?"

"Only try to look at them a little differently, Molly, not quite so wide-eyed and red-lipped — but primmer and with lowered lashes, just a bit contemptuous, as if you were thinking 'you might as well be a stick or a stone for all the thought I am giving you.'" The mental picture appeared to afford him satisfaction, for he resumed after a moment. "I believe if you'd practise it a while before the glass you could do it — you are so clever."

"Why on earth should I make myself ugly just to please you?"

"It wouldn't be making yourself ugly — I can't endure an ugly woman. All I want you to be is sober."

"Then what made you fall in love with me? It certainly was not for soberness."

He shook his head hopelessly, puzzled for the first time by the too obvious contradiction between the ideal and the actual — between the phantom of a man's imagination and the woman who enthralls his heart.

"To save my life I couldn't tell you why I did," he replied. "It does seem a bit foolish to fall in love with a woman as she is and then try to make her over into something different."

"Judy Hatch was the person God intended for you, I'm sure of it."

"Well, I'm not, and if I were I'd go ahead and defeat his intentions as I'm doubtless doing this minute. Let's make up now, so you'd as well stop talking silliness."

"It's you that talks silliness, not I — as if I were going through life lowering my lashes and looking contemptuous! But you're your mother all over again. I've heard her say a dozen times that a girl who is born homely ought to get down on her knees and thank the Lord for protecting her from temptation."

"You never heard me say it, did you?"

"No, but I shall yet if I live long enough — and all because of your ridiculous jealousy."

The humour of this struck him, and he remarked rather grimly:

"Good God, Molly, what a vixen you are!" Then he broke into a laugh, and catching her to him, stopped her mouth with kisses.

"Well, we're in it," he said, "and we can't get out, so there's no use fighting about it."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHADE OF MR. JONATHAN

Old Reuben, seated in his chair on the porch, watched Molly come up the flagged walk over the bright green edgings of moss. Her eyes, which were like wells of happiness, smiled at him beneath the blossoming apple boughs. Already she had forgotten the quarrel and remembered only the bliss of the reconciliation.

"I've had visitors while you were out, honey," said the old man as she bent to kiss him. "Mr. Chamberlayne and Mr. Jonathan came up and sat a bit with me."

"Was it on business, grandfather?"

"'Twas on yo' business, Molly, an' it eased my mind considerable about what's to become of you when I'm dead an' gone. It seems old Mr. Jonathan arranged it all befo' he died, an' they've only been waitin' till you came of age to let you into the secret. He left enough money in the lawyer's hands to make you a rich woman if you follow his wishes."

"Did they tell you his wishes?" she asked, turning from Reuben to Spot as the blind dog fawned toward her.

"He wants you to live with Miss Kesiah and Mr. Jonathan when I'm taken away from you, honey, an' you're to lose all but a few hundred if you ever marry and leave 'em. Old Mr. Jonathan had sharp eyes, an' he saw I had begun to fail fast befo' he died. It's an amazin' thing to think that even after all the morality is wrung out of human natur thar'll still be a few drops of goodness left sometimes at the bottom of it."

"And if I don't do as he wished? What will come of it, then, grandfather?"

"Then the bulk goes to help some po' heathens over yonder in China to the Gospel. He was a strange man, was old Mr. Jonathan. Thar warn't never any seein' through him, livin' or dead."

"Why did he ever come here in the beginning? He wasn't one of our people."

"The wind blew him this way, pretty, an' he was never one to keep goin' against the wind. When the last Jordan died childless an' the place was put up to be sold, Mr. Jonathan read about it somewhar, an' it looked to him as if all he had to do was to come down here an' bury himself alive to git rid of temptation. But the only way to win against temptation is to stand square an' grapple with it in the spot whar it finds you, an' he came to know this, po' sinner, befo' he was done with it."

"He was a good soldier, wasn't he?" asked Molly.

"So good a soldier that he could fight as well on one side as on t'other, an' 'twas only an accident that sent him into the army with me instead of against me. I remember his telling me once when I met him after a battle that 'twas the smell of blood, not the cause, that made him a fighter. Thar's many a man like that on both sides in every war, I reckon."

"I wonder how you can be so patient when you think of him!" she said passionately as he stopped.

"You'll understand better when you're past seventy," he answered gently. "Thar's a softness like a sort of green grass that springs up an' covers you when you begin to git old an' worn out. I've got it an' Spot's got it — you can tell by the way he won't trouble to git mad with the chickens that come peckin' around him. As soon as it's safely spread over you, you begin to see that the last thing to jedge anybody by is what you've known of the outside of 'em."

"I can't feel about him as you do, but I don't mind takin' his money as long as you share it," returned the girl in a softer voice.

"It's a pile of money such as you've never heard of, Molly. Mr. Chamberlayne says thar'll be an income of goin' on ten thousand dollars a year by the time you're a little older."

"Ten thousand dollars a year just for you an' me!" she exclaimed, startled.

"Thar warn't so much when 'twas left, but it's been doublin' on itself all the while you were waitin'."

"We could go everywhere an' see everything, grandfather."

"It ain't for me, pretty. Mr. Jonathan knew you wouldn't come into it till I was well on my way to the end of things."

Kneeling at his side, she caught his hands and clung to him, sobbing.

"Don't talk of dying! I can't bear to think of your leaving me!"

His trembling and knotted hands gathered her to him. "The young an' the old see two different sides of death, darlin'. When you're young an' full of spirit, it looks powerful dark an' lonely to yo' eyes, but when you're gittin' along an' yo' bones ain't quite so steady as they once were, an' thar seem to be mo' faces you're acquainted with on the other side than on this one — then what you've been so terrible afeared of don't look much harder to you than settlin' down to a comfortable rest. I've liked life well enough, but I reckon I'll like death even better as soon as I've gotten used to the feel of it. The Lord always appears a heap nearer to the dead, somehow, than He does to the livin', and I shouldn't be amazed to find it less lonely than life after I'm once safely settled."

"You've seen so many die that you've grown used to it," said Molly through her tears.

For a moment he gazed wistfully at the apple boughs, while his face darkened, as if he were watching a procession of shadows. In his seventy years he had gained a spiritual insight which penetrated the visible body of things in search of the truth beneath the ever-changing appearance. There are a few blameless yet suffering beings on whom nature has conferred a simple wisdom of the heart which contains a profounder understanding of life than the wisdom of the mind can grasp—and Reuben was one of these. Sorrow had sweetened in his soul until it had turned at last into sympathy.

"I've seen 'em come an' go like the flakes of light out yonder in the orchard," he answered almost in a whisper. "Young an' old, glad an' sorry, I've seen 'em go — an' never one among 'em but showed in thar face when 'twas over that 'twas the best thing had ever happened. It's hard for me now to separate the livin' from the dead, unless it be that the dead are gittin' closer all the time an' the livin' further away."

"And you're never afraid, grandfather?"

"Well, when it comes to that, honey, I reckon if I can trust the Lord in the light, I can trust him in the darkness. I ain't as good a Christian as my ma was—she could beat Sarah Revercomb when it came to sayin' the Bible backwards — but I've yet to see the spot of natur, either human or clay, whar we couldn't find the Lord at work if we was to dig deep enough."

He stopped at sight of a small figure running under the apple trees, and a minute later Patsey, the Gays' maid, reached the flagged walk, and panted out a request that Miss Molly should come to the house for a birthday present which awaited her there.

"Won't you go with me, grandfather?" asked the girl, turning to Reuben.

"I ain't at home thar, Molly," answered the old man. "It's well enough to preach equality an' what not when you're walking on the opposite side of the road, as Abel would say, but it don't ring true while yo' feet are slippin' an' slidin' over a parlour floor."

"Then I shan't go without you. Where you aren't welcome is a place I can stay away from."

"Thar, thar, honey, don't be runnin' arter Abel's notions till you find out whar they're leadin' you. Things are better as they are or the Lord wouldn't have made 'em so, an' He ain't goin' to step a bit faster or slower on o' count of our ragin'. Some folks were meant to be on top an' some at bottom, for t'otherwise God Almighty wouldn't have put 'em thar. Abel is like Sarah, only his generation is different."

"Do you really think he's like his mother?" asked Molly a little wistfully.

"As haw is like haw. They're both bent on doin' the Lord's job over again an' doin' it better, an' thar manner of goin' to work would be to melt up human natur an' pour it all into the same pattern. It ain't never entered Sarah's head that you can't fit the same religion to every man any mo' than you can the same pair of breeches. The big man takes the big breeches an' the little man takes the small ones, an' it's jest the same with religion. It may be cut after one pattern, but it's mighty apt to get its shape from the wearer inside. Why, thar ain't any text so peaceable that it ain't drawn blood from somebody."

"All the same I shan't go a step without you," persisted the girl.

"Then find my stick an' straighten my collar. Or had I better put on my Sunday black?"

"No, I like you as you are — only let me smooth your hair a little. Run ahead, Patsey, and say we're both coming."

Slipping her arm in his, she led him through the orchard, where the bluebirds were fluting blissfully in the apple-trees. To the heart of each spring was calling — but to Molly it meant promise and to Reuben remembrance. Though the bluebirds sang only one song, they brought to the old man and to the girl a different music.

"I've sometimes thought Mr. Mullen better suited to you than Abel, Molly," said Reuben presently, uttering an idea that had come to him more than once. "If you'd been inclined to fancy him, I don't believe either Mrs. Gay or Miss Kesiah could have found any fault with him."

"But you know I couldn't care for him, grandfather," protested Molly impatiently. "He is like one of Mrs. Bottom's air plants that grow without any roots."

"Well, he's young yet an' his soul struts a trifle, but wait till he's turned fifty an' he'll begin to be as good a Christian as he is a parson. It's a good mould, but he congealed a bit too stiff when he was poured into it."

They reached the grape arbour as he finished, and a minute later Abednego led them into the library, where Kesiah placed Reuben in a comfortable chair and hastened to bring him a glass of wine from the sideboard. At Molly's entrance, Gay and Mr. Chamberlayne came forward to shake hands with her, while Mrs. Gay looked up from her invalid's couch and murmured her name in a gentle, reproachful voice. The pale blue circles around the little lady's eyes and faintly smiling mouth were the only signs of the blighting experience through which she had passed. As she turned her angelic gaze on old Jonathan's daughter there was not an instant's doubt in the minds of those about her that she would accept the blow with the suffering sweetness that enhanced her beauty.

"We wanted to give you a little reminder of us on your birthday, Molly," she said, taking up an amethyst cross on a slender chain from the table beside her, "and Jonathan thought you would like a trinket to wear with your white dresses."

"I was right, wasn't I, cousin?" asked Gay, with his genial smile.

Mrs. Gay flushed slightly at the word, while Reuben cast a grateful glance at him over the untasted glass of wine in his hand.

Without drawing a step nearer, Molly stood there in the centre of the room, nervously twisting her handkerchief in and out of her fingers. She was physically cramped by her surroundings, and the reproachful gentleness in Mrs. Gay's face embarrassed her only less than did the intimate pleasantry of Jonathan's tone. Every detail of the library — the richness and heaviness of the furniture, the insipid fixed smiles in the family portrait, the costly fragility of the china ornaments — all these seemed to unite in some occult power which overthrew her self-possession and paralyzed her emotions.

Pitying her shyness, Gay took the chain from his mother's hand, and, slipping it around Molly's neck, fastened it under the bunch of curls at the back. Then he patted her encouragingly on the shoulder, while he spoke directly to Reuben.

"It looks well on her, don't you think, Mr. Merryweather?" he inquired.

"Yes, it's a pretty gift an' she's much obliged to all of you," replied Reuben, with the natural dignity which never deserted him. 'She's a good girl, Molly is," he added simply. "For all her quick words an' ways thar ain't a better girl livin'."

"We are very sure of that," said Mr. Chamberlayne, speaking in Gay's place. "She is a kinswoman any of us may be proud of owning." And going a step nearer to her, he began explaining her father's wishes in the shortest words at his command.

They were all kind—all honestly anxious to do their duty in aiding the atonement of old Jonathan. Their faces, their voices, their gestures, revealed an almost painful effort to make her appear at ease. Yet in spite of their irreproachable intentions, each one of them was perfectly aware that the visit was very far from being a success. They admired her sincerely, but with the exception of Gay, who was bothered by few moral prejudices, they were one and all nervously constrained in manner. To Mr. Chamberlayne she represented merely an attractive object of charity; to Kesiah she appeared as an encroaching member of the inferior order; to Mrs. Gay she embodied the tragic disillusionment of her life. In time they would either forget these first impressions or grow accustomed to them; but while she stood there, awkward and blushing, in the middle of the library where old Jonathan had worked out his repentance, even the lawyer found his legal eloquence tripping confusedly on his tongue, and turned at last in sheer desperation to stare with a sensation of relief at the frowning countenance of Kesiah. When, after a hesitating word of thanks, the girl held out her hand to Reuben, and they went away arm in arm, as they had come, a helpless glance passed from Jonathan to Mrs. Gay and from Mrs. Gay into vacancy.

"Like most eccentric bequests made in moments of great moral purpose, it was, of course, a mistake," said the lawyer. "Had Jonathan known the character of the miller, he would certainly have had no objection to Molly's choice — if she has, indeed, a serious fancy for the young man, which I doubt. But in his day, we must remember, the Revercombs had given little promise of either intelligence or industry except in the mother. Granting this," he added thoughtfully, "it might be possible to have the conditions set aside, but not without laying bare a scandal which would cause great pain to sensitive natures ——"

He glanced sympathetically at Mrs. Gay, who responded almost unconsciously to the emotional suggestion of his ideal of her.

"Oh, never that! I could not bear that!" she exclaimed.

"The whole trouble comes of the insane way people arrange the future," remarked Jonathan with irritation. "He actually believed, I dare say, that he was assuring the girl's happiness by that ridiculous document. But for mother I'd fight the thing in the courts and then give Molly her share outright and let her marry the miller."

The lawyer shook his head slowly, with his eyes on Mrs. Gay. "Before all else we must consider your mother," he answered.

For the first time Kesiah spoke. "I am quite willing to take the girl when Reuben dies," she said, "but why in the world did he put in that foolish clause about her living with Jonathan and myself?"

Without looking at her Mr. Chamberlayne answered almost sharply. "The whole truth of the matter is that there was a still more absurd idea in his mind, dear lady," he replied. "I may as well let you know it now since I combated it uselessly in my last interview with him. At the bottom of his heart Jonathan remained incorrigibly romantic until his death, and he clung desperately to the hope that if Molly received the education he intended her to have, her beauty and her charm, which seemed to him very remarkable, might win his nephew's affections, if she were thrown in his way. That, in short, is the secret meaning of this extraordinary document."

The uncomfortable silence was broken by a laugh as Gay rose to his feet. "Well, of all the ridiculous ideas!" he exclaimed in the sincerity of his amusement.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHADE OF REUBEN

Arm in arm Reuben and Molly walked slowly home through the orchard. Neither spoke until the old man called to Spot at his doorstep, and then Molly noticed that his breath came with a whistling sound that was unlike his natural voice.

"Are you tired, grandfather? What is the matter?"

"It's my chest, daughter. Let me sit down a while an' it will pass. Who is that yonder on the bench?"

"Old Mr. Doolittle. Wait here a minute before you speak to him."

It was a perfect spring afternoon, and the air was filled with vague, roving scents, as if the earth exhaled the sweetness of hidden flowers. In the apple orchard the young grass was powdered with gold, and the long grey shadows of the trees barred the ground like the sketchy outlines in an impressionist painting.

On a bench at one end of the porch old Adam was sitting, and at sight of them, he rose, and stood waiting with his pipe in his hand.

"As 'twas sech a fine day an' thar warn't any work on hand for a man of my years, I thought I'd walk over an' pay my respects to you," he said. "I've heard that 'twas yo' granddaughter's birthday an' that she's likely to change her name befo' it's time for another."

"Well, I'm glad to see you, old Adam," replied

Reuben, sinking into a chair while he invited his visitor to another. "I've gone kind of faint, honey," he added, "an' I reckon we'd both like a sip of blackberry wine if you've got it handy. Miss Kesiah gave me something to drink, but my throat was so stiff I couldn't swallow it."

The blackberry wine was kept in a large stone crock in the cellar, and while she filled the glasses, Molly heard the voice of old Adam droning on above the chirping of the birds in the orchard.

"I've been settin' here steddyin' them weeds out thar over-runnin' everything," he was saying, "an' it does appear to a considerin' body that the Lord might have made 'em good grass an' grain with precious little trouble to Himself an' a mortal lot of satisfaction to the po' farmers."

"He knows best. He knows best," responded Reuben.

"Well, I used to think that way befo' I'd looked into the matter," rejoined the other, "but the deeper I get, the less reason I see to be sartain sure. 'Tis the fashion for parsons, an' for some people outside of the pulpit, to jump to conclusions, an' the one they've jumped the farthest to get at, is that things are all as they ought to be. If you ain't possessed of the gift of logic it takes with you, but if you are possessed of it, it don't. Now, I tell you that if a farmer was to try to run his farm on the wasteful scale on which this world is conducted, thar wouldn't be one among us as would trust him with next season's crops. 'Tis sech a terrible waste that it makes a frugal mind sick to see it."

"Let's be thankful that it isn't any worse. He might have made it so," replied Reuben, shocked by his neighbour's irreverence, yet too modest to dispute it with authority.

"Now, if that's logic I don't know what logic is, though I was born with the gift of it," retorted old Adam. "When twenty seeds rot in the ground an' one happens up, thar're some folks as would praise the Lord for the one an' say nothin' about the twenty. These same folks are forever drawin' picturs of wild things hoppin' an' skippin' in the woods, as if they ever had time to hop an' skip when they're obleeged to keep one eye on the fox an' the hawk an' t'other on the gun of the hunter. Yet to hear Mr. Mullen talk in the pulpit, you'd think that natur was all hoppin' an' skippin'."

"You're a wicked unbeliever," said Reuben, mildly sorrowful, "an' you ought to go home and pray over your thankless doubts."

"I'm as I was made," rejoined the other. "I didn't ax to be born an' I've had to work powerful hard for my keep." Taking the glass of blackberry wine from Molly's hand, he smacked his lips over it with lingering enjoyment.

"Do you feel better, grandfather?" inquired the girl, in the pause.

"The wine does me good, honey, but thar's a queer gone feelin' inside of me. I'm twenty years younger than you, old Adam, but you've got mo' youth left in you than I have."

"'Tis my powerful belief in the Lord," chuckled the elder, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and placing the glass on the end of the bench. "No, no, Reuben, when it comes to that I ain't any quarrel with folks for lookin' al'ays at the pleasant side, but what staggers me is why they should take it as a merit to themselves when 'tis nothin' less than a weakness of natur. A man might jest as well pride himself that he can't see out of but one eye or hear out of but one ear as that he can't see nothin' but good when evil is so mixed up into it. Thar ain't all of us born with the gift of logic, but even when we ain't we might set silent an' listen to them that is."

A south wind, rising beyond the river, blew over the orchard, and the barred shadows swung back and forth on the grass.

"'Tis the eye of faith we see with," remarked Reuben quietly.

"Eh, an' 'tis the eye of sense you're weak in," responded old Adam. "I knew a blind man once that had a pictur of the world in his mind jest as smooth an' pretty as the views you see on the backs of calendars — with all the stink-weeds an' the barren places left out of it — an' he used to talk to us seein' ones for all the earth as if he were better acquainted with natur than we were."

"I ain't larned an' I never pretended to be," said Reuben, piously, "but the Lord has used me well in His time an' I'm thankful to Him."

"Now that's monstrous odd," commented the ancient cynic, "for lookin' at it from the outside, I'd say He'd used you about as bad as is His habit in general."

He rose from the bench, and dusted the seat of his blue overalls, while he gazed sentimentally over the blossoming orchard. "'Tis the seventeenth of April, so we may git ahead with plantin'," he remarked. "Ah, well, it's a fine early spring an' puts me in mind of seventy years ago when I was courtin.' Thar ain't many men, I reckon, that can enjoy lookin' back on a courtin' seventy years after it is over. 'Tis surprisin' how some things sweeten with age, an' memory is one of 'em."

Reuben merely nodded after him as he went, for he had grown too tired to answer. A curious stillness — half happiness, half indifference — was stealing over him, and he watched as in a dream, the blue figure of old Adam hobble over the sun-flecked path through the orchard. A few minutes later Molly flitted after the elder, and Reuben's eyes followed her with the cheerful look with which he had faced seventy years of life. On a rush mat in the sunshine the old hound flicked his long black ear at a fly of which he was dreaming, and from a bower of ivy in the eaves there came the ceaseless twitter of sparrows. Beyond the orchard, the wind, blowing from the marshes, chased the thin, sketchy shadows over the lawn at Jordan's Journey.

While he sat there Reuben began to think, and as always, his thoughts were humble and without self-consciousness. As he looked under the gnarled boughs of the orchard, he seemed to see his whole life stretching before him — seventy years — all just the same except that with each he appeared a little older, a little humbler, a little less expectant that some miracle might happen and change the future. At the end of that long vista, he saw himself young and strong, and filled with a great hope for something — he hardly knew what — that would make things different. He had gone on, still hoping, year by year, and now at the end, he was an old, bent, crippled man, and the miracle had never happened. Nothing had ever made things different, and the great hope had died in him at last as the twenty seeds of which old Adam had spoken had died in the earth. He remembered all the things he had wanted that he had never had — all the other things he had not wanted that had made up his life. Never had a hope of his been fulfilled, never had an event fallen out as he had planned it, never had a prayer brought him the blessing for which he had prayed. Nothing in all his seventy years had been just what he had wanted — not just what he would have chosen if the choice had been granted him — yet the sight of the birds in the apple trees stirred something in his heart to-day that was less an individual note of rejoicing than a share in the undivided movement of life which was pulsing around him. Nothing that had ever happened to him as Reuben Merryweather would he care to live over; but he was glad at the end that he had been a part of the spring and had not missed seeing the little green leaves break out in the orchard.

And then while he sat there, half dreaming and half awake, the stillness grew suddenly full of the singing of blue birds. Spring blossomed radiantly beneath his eyes, and the faint green and gold of the meadows blazed forth in a pageant of colour.

"I'm glad I didn't miss it," he thought. "That's the most that can be said, I reckon — I'm glad I didn't miss it."

The old hound, dreaming of flies, flapped his long ears in the sunshine, and a robin, hopping warily toward a plate of seed-cakes on the arm of Reuben's chair, winged back for a minute before he alighted suspiciously on the railing. Then, being an old and a wise bird, he advanced again, holding his head slightly sideways and regarding the sleeping man with a pair of bright, inquisitive eyes. Reassured at last by the silence, he uttered a soft, throaty note, and flew straight to the arm of the chair in which Reuben was sitting. With his glance roving from the quiet man to the quiet dog, he made a few tentative flutters toward the plate of cake. Then, gathering courage from the adventure, he hopped deliberately into the centre of the plate and began pecking greedily at the scattered crumbs.

CHAPTER XIX

TREATS OF CONTRADICTIONS

As Molly passed down the Haunt's Walk, it seemed to her, also, that the spring had suddenly blossomed. A moment before she had not known that the path she trod was changing to emerald, that the meadows were spangled with wild-flowers, that the old oaks on the lawn were blushing in rose and silver. For weeks these miracles had happened around her, and she had not noticed. As oblivious to them as old Adam Doolittle was, she had remembered only that her birthday came on the seventeenth of April, when, except for some luckless mishap, the promise of the spring was assured.

A red-winged blackbird darted like a flame across the path in front of her, and following it into the open, she found Kesiah gathering wild azalea on the edge of the thicket.

At the girl's approach, the elder woman rose from her stooping posture, and came forward, wearing a frown, which, after the first minute, Molly saw was directed at the sunlight, not at herself. Kesiah's long, sallow face under the hard little curls of her false front, had never appeared more grotesque than it did in the midst of the delicate spring landscape. Every fragile blossom, every young leaf, every blade of grass, flung an insult at her as she stood there frowning fiercely at the sunbeams. Yet only five minutes before she had suffered a sharp recrudescence of soul — of that longing for happiness which is a part of the resurrection of the spring, and which may survive not only the knowledge of its own fruitlessness, but a belief in the existence of the very happiness for which it longs. All the unlived romance in her heart had come to life with the young green around her. Middle-age had not deadened, it had merely dulled her. For the pang of desire is not, after all, the divine prerogative of youth, nor has it even a conscious relation to the possibility of fulfilment. Her soul looked out of her eyes while she gazed over the azalea in her hand — yet, in spite of the songs of the poets, the soul in her eyes did not make them beautiful.

"I came down with Jonathan, Molly," she said. "You will doubtless find him at the brook." For an instant she hesitated in confusion and then added hurriedly, "We were speaking about you."

"Were you?" asked Molly a little awkwardly, for Kesiah always embarrassed her.

"We were both saying how much we admired your devotion to your grandfather. One rarely finds such attachment in the young to the old."

"I have always loved him better than anybody except mother."

"I am sure you have, and it speaks very well for both of you. We are all much interested in you, Molly."

"It's kind of you to think about me," answered Molly, and her voice was constrained as it had been when she spoke in the library at Jordan's Journey.

"We feel a great concern for your future," said

Kesiah. "Whatever we can do to help you, we shall do very gladly. I always felt a peculiar pity and sympathy for your mother." Her voice choked, for it was, perhaps, as spontaneous an expression of her emotions as she had ever permitted herself.

"Thank you, ma'am," replied Molly simply, and the title of respect to which Reuben had trained her dropped unconsciously from her lips. She honestly liked Kesiah, though, in common with the rest of her little world, she had fallen into the habit of regarding her as a person whom it was hardly worth one's while to consider. Mrs. Gay had so completely effaced her sister that the rough edges of Kesiah's character were hardly visible beneath the little lady's enveloping charm.

"It is natural that you should have felt bitterly toward your father," began the older woman again in a trembling voice, "but I hope you realize that the thought of his wrong to you and your mother saddened his last hours."

To her surprise Molly received the remark almost passionately.

"How could that give me back my mother's ruined life?" she demanded.

"I know, dear, but the fact remains that he was your father ——"

"Oh, I don't care in the least about the fact," retorted Molly, with her pretty rustic attempt at a shrug, which implied, in this case, that the government of nature, like that of society, rested solely on the consent of the governed. What was clear to Kesiah was that this rebellion against the injustice of the universe, as well as against the expiation of Mr. Jonathan, was the outcome of a strong, though undisciplined, moral passion within her. In her way, Molly was as stern a moralist as Sarah Revercomb, but she derived her convictions from no academic system of ethics. Kesiah had heard of her as a coquette; now she realized that beneath the coquetries there was a will of iron.

"You must come to us, some day, dear, and let us do what we can to make you happy," she said. "It would be a pity for all that money to go to the conversion of the Chinese, who are doubtless quite happy as they are."

"I wonder why he chose the Chinese?" replied the girl. "They seem so far away, and there's poor little Mrs. Meadows at Piping Tree who is starving for bread."

"He was always like that — and so is my sister Angela — the thing that wasn't in sight was the thing he agonized over." She did not confess that she had detected a similar weakness in herself, and that, seen the world over, it is the indubitable mark of the sentimentalist.

Analysis of Mr. Jonathan's character, however, failed to interest his daughter. She smiled sweetly, but indifferently, and made a movement to pass on into the meadow. Then, looking into Kesiah's face, she said in a warmer voice: "If ever you want my help about your store room, Miss Kesiah, just send for me. When you're ready to change the brine on your pickles, I'll come down and do it."

"Thank you, Molly," answered the other; "you're a nice light hand for such things."

In some almost imperceptible manner she felt that the girl had rebuffed her. The conversation had been pleasant enough, yet Kesiah had meant to show in it that she considered Molly's position changed since the evening before; and it was this very suggestion that the girl had tossed lightly aside — tossed without rudeness or malice, but with a firmness, a finality, which appeared to settle the question forever. The acknowledged daughter of Mr. Jonathan Gay was determined that she should continue to be known merely as the granddaughter of his overseer. Kesiah's overtures, had been — well, not exactly repulsed, but certainly ignored; her advice had melted to thin air as soon as it was spoken. As Molly flitted from her over the young weeds in the meadow, the older woman stood looking after her with a heaviness, like the weight of unshed tears, in her eyes. Not the girl's future, but her own, appeared to her barren of interest, robbed even of hope. The spirit that combats, she saw, had never been hers — nor had the courage that prevails. For this reason fate had been hard to her — because she had never withstood it — because she had always yielded to pressure — because she had stepped by habit rather than choice into the vacant place. She was a good woman — her heart assured her of this — she had done her duty no matter what it cost her — and she had possessed, moreover, a fund of common sense which had aided her not a little in doing it. It was this common sense that told her now that facts were, after all, more important than dreams — that the putting up of pickles was a more useful work in the world than the regretting of possibilities — that the sordid realities were not less closely woven into the structure of existence than were the romantic illusions. She told herself these things, yet in spite of her words she saw her future stretching away, like her past, amid a multitude of small duties for which she had neither inclination nor talent. One thing after another, all just alike, day after day, month after month, year after year. Nothing ahead of her, and, looking back, nothing behind her that she would care to stop and remember. "That's life," she said softly to herself and went on her way, while Molly, glancing back, beheld her only as a blot in the sunshine.

"Poor Miss Kesiah," the girl thought before she forgot her. "I wonder if she's ever really lived?"

Then the wonder fled from her mind, for, as a shadow fell over her path, she looked up, startled, into the eyes of Gay, who had burst suddenly out of the willows. His face was flushed and he appeared a trifle annoyed. As he stopped before her, he cut sharply at the weeds with a small whip he carried.

"Don't, please," she said; "I hate to see people cut off the heads of innocent things."

"It is rather beastly," he returned, his face clearing. "Did you come out to find me, cousin?"

"Why should I, Mr. Jonathan?"

"You don't soften the blow — but why 'Mr. Jonathan'?"

"I thought it was your name."

"It's not my name to you — I say, Molly, do you mind my telling you that you're a brick?"

"Oh, no, not if you feel like it."

"I do feel like it tremendously."

"Then I don't mind in the least," and to prove it she smiled radiantly into his face. Her smile was the one really beautiful thing about Molly, but as far as her immediate purpose went it served her as successfully as a host.

"By George, I like your devotion to the old chap!" he exclaimed. "I hope a girl will stick by me as squarely when I am beginning to totter."

"Have you ever been as good to one?" she asked quite seriously, and wondered why he laughed.

"Well, I doubt if I ever have, but I'd like very much to begin."

"You're not a grandfather, Mr. Jonathan."

"No, I'm not a grandfather — but, when I come to think of it, I'm a cousin."

She accepted this with composure. "Are you?" she inquired indifferently after a minute.

While she spoke he asked himself if she were really dull, or if she had already learned to fence with her exrustic weapons? Her face was brimming with expression, but, as he reminded himself, one never could tell.

"I haven't any cousin but you, Molly. Don't you think you can agree to take me?"

She shook her head, and he saw, or imagined he saw, the shadow of her indignant surprise darken her features.

"I've never thought of you as my cousin," she answered.

"But I am, Molly."

"I don't think of you so," she retorted. Again, as in the case of Kesiah's advances, she was refusing to constitute a law by her acknowledgment.

"Don't you think if you tried very hard you might begin to?"

"Why should I try?"

"Well, suppose we say just because I want you to."

"That wouldn't help me. I can't feel that it would make any difference."

"What I want, you mean?"

"Yes, what you want."

"Aren't you a shade more tolerant of my existence than you were at first?"

"I suppose so, but I've never thought about it — any more than I've thought of this ten thousand a year. It's all outside of my life, but grandfather's in it."

"Don't you ever feel that you'd like to get outside of it yourself? The world's a big place."

For the first time she appeared attentive to his words.

"I've often wondered what it was like — especially the cities — New York, Paris, London. Paris is the best, isn't it?"

"Yes, Paris is the best to me. Have you ever thought that you'd like to wear pretty gowns and drive through a green park in the spring — filled with other carriages in which are wonderful women?"

"But I'd feel so miserable and countrified," she answered. "Are they any happier than I am — those wonderful women?"

"Perhaps not so happy — there's a green-eyed dragon gnawing at the hearts of some of them, and you, my nut-brown beauty, have never felt his fangs."

"I'd like to see them," she said after a minute, and moved slowly onward.

"Some day you may. Look here, Molly," he burst out impulsively, "I'm not going to be sentimental about you. I haven't the least idea of making love to you — I've had enough of that sort of rot, God knows — but I do like you tremendously, and I want to stand to you as a big brother. I never had a sister, you know," he added.

Something earnest and tender in his voice touched her generosity, which overflowed so easily.

"And I never had a brother," she rejoined.

"Then, that's where I'll come in, little cousin," he answered gently, and, drawing her to him, kissed her cheek with a caress which surprised him by its unlikeness to the ordinary manifestations of love.

His hand was still on her shoulder, when he felt her start back from his grasp, and, turning quickly in the direction of her glance, he saw the miller looking at them from the thicket on the opposite side of the brook. The anger in Abel's face had distorted his handsome features until they appeared swollen as if from drink, and for a single instant Gay imagined that it was indeed whisky and not passion that had wrought so brutal a change in him.

"So you've made a fool of me, too, Molly?" he said, when he had swung over the stream and stood facing her.

"You're all wrong, Revercomb," began Gay, and stopped the next instant, because Molly's hand had shot out to silence him.

"Will you be quiet?" she flung at him impatiently; and then fixing her eyes on Abel, she waited silently for him to finish his speech. That her lover's fiery temper had aroused her own, Gay realized as soon as he turned to her. Her face was pale, but her eyes blazed, and never had he felt so strongly the tie of blood that united them as he did while she stood there waiting for Abel's accusations with a gesture which appeared to fling them back in disdain.

"I might have known 'twas all fool's play with you — I might have known you had flirted too much to settle down to an honest love," said Abel, breathing hard between his words as if each one were torn from him with a physical wrench at his heart. In losing his self-possession he had lost his judgment as well, and, grasping something of his love from the sincerity of his emotion, Gay made another ineffectual effort to present the situation in a fairer light.

"If you would only listen, my good fellow — if you would only let me explain things ——" he began.

"Will you be quiet?" said Molly a second time, and then facing him passionately she threw him a gesture of dismissal. "If you want to please me, you will go."

"And leave you alone with him?"

She laughed. "Do you think I'm afraid of an angry man, or that I've never seen one before?"

With that he obeyed her, turning from time to time on his way over the meadow to make sure that she did not need his support. In spite of the utter unreasonableness of the affair, in some unaccountable way his sympathies were on the side of the miller. The fellow was a boor, of course, but, by Jove! he was a magnificent boor. It had been long since Gay had seen such an outburst of primitive feeling — long since he had come so close to the good red earth on which we walk and of which we are made.

"You're out of your head, Abel," said Molly— Gay turned away from them — and the tone in which she spoke was hardly calculated to bring him back to the place he had deserted. "You will say things you'll regret, but I'll never forgive."

"I'm sick of your eternal forgiveness," he retorted.

"I've been forgiven every time you got into a temper, and I suppose I'll be forgiven next every time you are kissed." The "rousing" which had threatened every Revercomb was upon him at last.

"Well, as a matter of fact it is time enough for you to forgive me when I ask you to," she returned.

"You needn't ask. It's too much this time, and I'll be damned before I will do it."

Bending over a grey skeleton of last year's golden-rod, she caressed it gently, without breaking its ghostly bloom. Years afterward, when she had forgotten every word he uttered, she could still see that dried spray of golden-rod growing against the April sky — she could still hear a bluebird that sang three short notes and stopped in the willows. In the quiet air their anger seemed to rush together as she had sometimes thought their love had rushed to a meeting.

"You have neither the right to forgive me nor to judge me," she said. "Do you think I care what a man imagines of me who believes a thing against me as easily as you do. If you went on your knees to me now I should never explain — and if I chose to kiss every man in the county," she concluded in an outburst of passion, "you have nothing to do with it!"

"Explain? How can a girl explain a man's kissing her, except by saying she let him do it?"

"I did let him do it," she gasped.

For an instant they gazed at each other in an anger more violent in its manifestation than their love had been. An observer, noticing them for the first time, would have concluded that they had hated each other for years, not that they had been lovers only a few minutes before. Nature, having wearied of her play, was destroying her playthings.

"I would marry no man on earth who wouldn't believe me in spite of that — and everything else," she said.

"Do you expect a man to believe you in spite of his eyes?"

"Eyes, ears — everything! Do you think I'd have turned on you like that before I had heard you?"

A sob, not of pity, but of rage, burst from her lips, and the sound sobered him more completely than her accusations had done. Her temper he could withstand, but that little childish sob, bitten back almost before it escaped, brought him again on his knees to her.

"I can't understand — oh, Molly, don't you see I am in torment?" he cried.

But the veil of softness was gone now, and the cruelty that is bound up in some inexplicable way in all violent emotion — even in the emotion of love — showed itself on the surface.

"Then stay there, for you've made it for yourself," she answered, and turned away from him. As his voice called her again, she broke into a run, flying before him over the green meadow until she reached the lawn of Jordan's Journey, and his pursuit ended. Then, hurrying through the orchard and up the flagged walk, she ascended the steps, and bent over Reuben in his chair.

"Grandfather, I am back. Are you asleep?"

The robin that had flown from the railing at her approach swung on the bough of an apple-tree and regarded her with attention.

"Grandfather," she said again, touching him, "oh, grandfather, wake up!"

CHAPTER XX

LIFE'S IRONIES

WHEN he came down to breakfast next morning, Abel heard of Reuben's death from his mother.

"Well, you can't tell who's goin' to be the next," she concluded grimly, as she poured the coffee.

In spite of her austere manner and her philosophical platitude, Sarah was more moved in her heart than she had dared to confess. From the moment that she had heard of Reuben's death — when she had gone over with some of her mourning to offer Molly — she had ceased to think of him as an old man, and her mind had dwelt upon him as one who had been ruthlessly cut off in his prime —as he might have been had the end come some thirty or forty years before. Memory, that great miracle worker, had contrived to produce this illusion; and all Sarah's hard common sense could not prevent her feeling an indignant pity because Reuben's possibilities of happiness had been unfulfilled. Trouble after trouble and never anything to make up for them, and then to go this way while he was resting! "It's like that," she thought bitterly to herself, alluding to life. "It's like that!" And it seemed to her suddenly that the whole of existence was but a continual demonstration of the strong religious dogmas on which her house of faith had been reared. When you looked around you, she thought, with triumph, there wasn't any explanation of the seeming injustice except original sin. There was a strange comfort in this conviction, as though it represented the single reality to which she could cling amid the mutable deceptions of life. "Thar wouldn't be any sense in it if 'twarn't for that," she would sometimes say to herself, as one who draws strength from a secret source of refreshment.

In Abel the news of Reuben's death awoke a different emotion, and his first thought was of Molly. He longed to comfort her in his arms, and the memory of the quarrel of yesterday and even of the kiss that led to it seemed to increase rather than to diminish this longing.

Rising from his untasted breakfast, he hurriedly swallowed a cup of coffee and took up his hat.

"I am going to see Molly, mother; would you like to send a message?"

Blossom, who was gazing out of the window with her eyes full of dreams, turned at his words.

"Give her my love, Abel," she said.

"Tell her he was a good man and had fewer sins to his account than most of us," added Sarah.

"Did you know, Abel, that old Mr. Jonathan left her ten thousand dollars a year as long as she lives with the Gays?" asked Blossom, coming over to where he stood.

He stared at her in amazement. "Where on earth did you hear that?" he asked.

A flush reddened her face.

"Somebody told me. I forget just who it was," she replied.

"When did it happen? How long have you known it?"

But she was on her guard now, wrapped in that soft, pale reticence which was the spiritual aspect of her beauty.

"It may have been only one of the darkies' stories. I didn't pay much attention to it," she answered, and busied herself about the geraniums in the window.

"Oh, you can't put any faith in the darkies' tales," rejoined Abel, and, after leaving a message with his mother for a farmer with whom he had an appointment, he hastened out of the house and over the fields in the direction of Reuben Merryweather's cottage. Here, where he had expected to find Molly, Kesiah met him, with some long black things over her arm, and a frown of anxious sympathy on her face.

"The child is broken-hearted," she said with dignity, for a funeral was one of the few occasions upon which she felt that she appeared to advantage. "I don't think she can see you — but I'll go in and ask, if you wish it."

She went in, returning a minute later, with the black things still over her arm, and a deeper frown on her forehead.

"No — I'm sorry, but she doesn't wish to see any one. You know, the old hound died in the night, and that has added to her sorrow."

"Perhaps if I come back later?"

"Perhaps; I am not sure. As soon as the funeral is over she will come to us. You have heard, I suppose, of the change in — in her circumstances?"

"Then it is true? I heard it, but I didn't believe it."

Molly had fled suddenly into remoteness — not Reuben's death, but Mr. Jonathan's "provision," had swept her away from him. Like other mortals in other crises of experience, he was aware of a helpless, a rebellious, realization of the power, not of fate, but of money. No other accident of fortune could have detached her so completely from the surroundings in which he had known her. Though he told himself that to think of wealth as a thing to separate them was to show a sordid brutality of soul, he revolted the next instant from the idea that his love should demand so great a sacrifice. Like the majority of men who have risen to comparative comfort out of bitter poverty, he had at the same time a profound contempt and an inordinate respect for the tangible fact of money — a contempt for the mere value of the dollar and a respect for the ability to take stands of which that mystic figure was the symbol. Sarah's hard common sense, overlaid as it was by an embroidery of sentiments and emotions, still constituted the basic quality in his character, and Sarah would have been the last woman in the world to think lightly of renouncing — or of inviting another to renounce — an income of ten thousand dollars a year. *He* might dream that love would bring happiness, but she was reasonably assured that money would bring comfort. Between the dream and the assurance there would have been, in Sarah's mind at least, small room left for choice. He had known few women, and for one dreadful minute he asked himself, passionately, if Molly and his mother could be alike?

Unconsciously to himself his voice when he spoke again had lost its ring of conviction.

"Perhaps I may see her later?" he repeated.

"The funeral will be to-morrow. You will be there?"

"Yes, I'll be there," he replied; and then because there was nothing further for him to say, he bowed over his hat, and went down the flagged walk to the orchard, where the bluebirds were still singing. His misery appeared to him colossal — of a size that overshadowed not only the spring landscape, but life itself. He tried to remember a time when he was happy, but this was beyond the stretch of his imagination at the moment, and it seemed to him that he had plodded on year after year with a leaden weight oppressing his heart.

"I might have known it would be like this," he was thinking. "First, I wanted the mill, so I'd lie awake at night about it, and then when I got it all the machinery was worn out. It's always that way and always will be, I reckon." And it appeared to him that this terrible law of incompleteness lay like a blight over the whole field of human endeavour. He saw Molly, fair and fitting as she had been yesterday after the quarrel, and he told himself passionately that he wanted her too much ever to win her. On the ground by the brook he saw the spray of last year's golden-rod, and the sight brought her back to him with a vividness that set his pulses drumming. In his heart he cursed Mr. Jonathan's atonement more fervently than he had ever cursed his sin.

The next day he went to Reuben's funeral, with his mother and Blossom at his side, walking slowly across the moist fields, in which the vivid green of the spring showed like patches of velvet on a garment of dingy cloth. In front of him his mother moved stiffly in her widow's weeds, which she still wore on occasions of ceremony, and in spite of her sincere sorrow for Reuben she cast a sharp eye more than once on the hem of her alpaca skirt, which showed a brown stain where she had allowed it to drag in a forgetful moment. Only Archie was absent, but that was merely because he had driven over to bring one of the Halloween girls in Abel's gig. Sarah had heard him whistling in the stable at daybreak, and looking out of the window a little later she had seen him oiling the wheels of the vehicle. It had been decided at supper the evening before that the family as a unit should pay its respects to Reuben. From Sarah, comforting herself behind her widow's weeds with the doctrine of original sin, to Archie, eager to give his sweetheart a drive, one and all had been moved by a genuine impulse to dignify as far as lay in their power the ceremonial of decay. Even Abner, the silent, had remarked that he'd "never heard a word said against Reuben Merryweather in his life." And now at the end of that life the neighbours had gathered amid the ridges of green graves in the churchyard to bear witness to the removal of a good man from a place in which he had been honoured.

During the service Abel kept his eyes on Molly, who came leaning on Gay's arm, and wearing what appeared to him a stifling amount of fashionable mourning. He was too ignorant in such matters to discern that the fashion was one of an earlier date, or that the mourning had been hastily gathered from cedar chests by Kesiah. The impression he seized and carried away was one of elegance and remoteness; and the little lonely figure in the midst of the green ridges bore no relation in his mind to the girl in the red jacket, who had responded so ardently to his kiss. The sunlight falling in flecks through the network of locust boughs deepened the sense of unreality with which he watched her.

"It's a good service as such ready-made things go," observed Sarah as they went homeward, "but it seems to me that a man as upright as Reuben was is entitled to a sermon bein' preached about him when he's laid in his grave. What's the difference between the good man and the bad, if you're goin' to say the same words over the one and the other? I ain't a friend to flattery, but it can't hurt a man to have a few compliments paid him in the churchyard, and when all's said an' done, 'lookin' for the general Resurrection' can't be construed into a personal compliment to Reuben."

"When a man has been as pious as that he hasn't any use for compliments, livin' or dead," rejoined Abner.

"Well, I ain't contendin'," replied his mother. "The Lord knows thar ain't any of his kind left, the mo' 's the pity! Things have changed sence Reuben an' I was young, an' the very language Abel an' Blossom speak is different from ours. I reckon if old Mr. Jonathan was to ride along these roads to-day thar wouldn't be anybody, unless it was a nigger, to open the gate for him."

"You bet there wouldn't!" exclaimed Abel with fervour.

Abner, walking at Sarah's side, wore the unnerved and anxious expression of a man who is conscious that he is wearing his Sunday suit when it has grown too small to contain him. His agony was so evident that Blossom, observing it in the midst of her sentimental disturbances, remarked affectionately that he looked as if he "were tired to death."

"I've got the church fidgets in my legs," he said. "I reckon I'll get into my everyday suit an' finish that piece of ploughin'. Are you goin' back to the mill, Abel?"

"No, I've shut down for the day," Abel replied. The funeral had turned his mind into its Sunday habit of thought and he was determined that his present state of misery should extend reverently until the evening. From some instinct, which he did not attempt to explain, it appeared more respectful to Reuben to sit idle for the rest of the day than to follow Abner's example and go out and finish his work.

The next morning he decided to write Molly a letter, and as the ordinary paper his mother kept at the house seemed unsuitable for delivery at Jordan's Journey, he walked down to the store to purchase a few sheets from Mrs. Bottom.

"Nothing common and cheap," he said, "but the very best you have in the store — such as they use in the city."

Suspecting his purpose, she produced at once a turquoise coloured box, from which she extracted an envelope that was ornamented on the flap with a white dove holding a true lover's knot in his beak.

"This is the very thing you're lookin' for," she observed, in the tone of one who is conscious of being an authority in that sphere to which God has called her, "the latest style in Applegate."

Picking up the envelope he held it doubtfully toward the light in the doorway.

"Are you sure it isn't a little — a little loud?" he inquired wistfully.

"Loud? Dear me, to think of you callin' a dove an' a blue ribbon bow loud! Ain't that jest like a man? They can't be expected to have taste in sech matters.

No, it ain't loud!" she replied with more direct condescension. "It's the latest thing from Applegate — the girls are all crazy about it — jest the little artistic trifle that catches a woman's eye."

In the end, under the sting of her rebuke, though but half convinced, he concluded the purchase and went out, bearing the box of ornamented paper under his arm. An hour later, after the letter was written, misgivings besieged him anew, and he stood holding the envelope at arm's length, while he frowned dubiously at the emblematic dove on the flap.

"It doesn't look just right to me," he said under his breath, "but Mrs. Bottom ought to know, and I reckon she does."

The letter went, and the next afternoon he followed it in person to Jordan's Journey. Gay was coming down the walk when he reached the lawn, and after a moment's hesitation they stopped to exchange a few remarks about the weather.

"There's something I want to explain to you, Revercomb," said Jonathan, wheeling back abruptly after they had parted. "Molly has become a member of our household, you see; so my relation to her is really that of a cousin. She's a staunch little soul — I've a tremendous admiration for her — but there has never been the slightest sentiment between us, you understand."

"Yes, I understand," replied Abel, and fell silent.

There was a certain magnanimity, he recognized, in Gay's effort to put things right even while he must have preferred in his heart to have them remain in the wrong. As Molly's cousin it was hardly probable that he should care to hasten her marriage to a country miller.

"Well, I wanted you to know, that was all," said Gay in a friendly tone. "You'll find Molly in the side-garden, so I wouldn't trouble to knock if I were you."

He went on, swinging with an easy stride between the hedges of box, while Abel, passing the right wing in obedience to the directions, found Molly walking up and down in a small grassy path, which was sprinkled with snowdrops. The "side-garden" was a ruined, over-grown square, planted in miniature box, which the elder Gay had laid out after one of his visits to Italy. Now, with its dwindling maze and its unpruned rose-bushes, it resembled a picture which has been blotted out until the original intention of the artist is no longer discernible. Yet the place was exquisite still. Spring had passed over it with her magical touch, and she had decorated the spot she could no longer restore. The scent of box filled the air, and little new green leaves had put out on the dusky windings of the maze.

As Abel approached, Molly was moving slowly away from him, her long black skirt, which had been made to fit Mrs. Gay, trailing over the snowdrops in the path. When she turned at the end of the walk, there was the faintest hesitancy in her manner before she came forward with a smile and an outstretched hand. In some subtle way she had changed — he felt it before she reached him — before she uttered a word. He had never seen her in a long dress until to-day; and in putting on Mrs. Gay's gown she seemed to have clothed herself in that lady's appealing and pensive manner. The black skirt, flowing between them on the grass, divided them more completely than the memory of their quarrel. He was chilled because it made her appear reserved and distant; she was embarrassed because she had not yet learned to walk in a train, and while it pleased and flattered her with a sense of dignity, it also caused her to feel awkward and unnatural in her movements, as if she were not "playing up" successfully to the part that had been assigned her. She had learned a good deal in three days, and she was still a little confused by the endeavour to understand all of her lessons. Sincere as her sorrow was for Reuben, her youth and a certain quickness of observation had kept her mindful of every change through which she had passed, of every detail which distinguished life at the "big house" from life in the overseer's cottage. She had learned, for instance, the necessity, in such circumstances, of eating as if it were an utterly indifferent matter, and yet of coming to one's meals dressed as elaborately as if one were on one's way to church. Kesiah had taught her much; but from Gay, with his abundant kindliness, his self-possession, his good clothes, she had learned incomparably more. Kesiah had shown her the external differences in "things," while Gay had opened her eyes to the external differences that might count in men. Until she knew Gay she had believed that the cultivation of one's appearance was a matter that concerned women alone. Now, when moved by some unfortunate impulse of respect for her mourning, Abel showed himself before her in his Sunday clothes, she was conscious of a shock which she would never have felt in the old days in the overseer's cottage. In his working dress, with his fine throat bared by his blue shirt, there was a splendid vitality about her lover beside which Jonathan appeared flabby and over-weighted with flesh. But dressed in imitation of the work of Gay's London tailor, the miller lost the distinction which nature had given him without acquiring the one conferred by society.

"You got my letter, Molly?" he asked — and the question was unfortunate, for it reminded her not only of the letter, but of Gay's innocent jest about the dove on the envelope. She had been ashamed at the instant, and she was ashamed now when she remembered it, for there is nothing so contagious as an active regard for the petty social values of life. In three days she had not only begun to lose her own crudeness — she had attained to a certain small criticism of the crudeness of Abel. Already the difference between the two men was irritating her, yet she was still unconscious as to the exact particular in which this difference lay. Her vision had perceived the broad distinction of class, though it was untrained as yet to detect minute variations of manner. She knew instinctively that Gay looked a man of the world and Abel a rustic, but this did not shake in the least the knowledge that it was Abel, not Gay, whom she loved.

"Yes, I got your letter," she answered, and then she added very softly: "Abel, I've always known I was not good enough for you."

Her tone, not her words, checked his advance, and he stood staring at her in perplexity. It was this expression of dumb questioning which had so often reminded her of the look in the eyes of Reuben's hound, and as she met it now, she flinched a little from the thought of the pain she was inflicting.

"I'm not good and faithful, Abel; I'm not patient, I'm not thrifty, I'm not anything your wife ought to be."

"You're all I'm wanting, anyway, Molly," he replied quietly, but without moving toward her.

"I feel — I am quite sure we could not be happy together," she went on hurriedly, as if in fear that he might interrupt her before she had finished.

"Do you mean that you want to be free?" he asked after a minute.

"I don't know, but I don't want to marry anybody. All the feeling I had went out of me when grandfather died — I've been benumbed ever since — and I don't want to feel ever again, that's the worst of it."

"Is this because of the quarrel?"

"Oh, you know — you know, I was always like this. I'm a thing of freedom — I can't be caged, and so we'd go on quarrelling and kissing, kissing and quarrelling, until I went out of my mind. You'd want to make me over and I'd want to make you over, like two foolish children fighting at play."

It was true what she had said, and he realized it, even though he protested against it. She was a thing of freedom as much as one of the swallows that flashed by in the sunlight.

"And you don't want to marry me? You want to be free — to be rich?"

"It isn't the money — but I don't want to marry."

"Have you ever loved me, I wonder?" he asked a little bitterly.

For an instant she hesitated, trying in some fierce self-reproach to be honest. "I thought so once, and I suppose I'll think so again," she answered. "The truth is I've loved you some days, and some days

I haven't. I've never believed much in it, you know — I wasn't that kind of woman. It always meant so much less to me than to others."

It was true again, he admitted it. She had never been — and he had always known it — "that kind of woman." She had safely mocked at sex only because she had never felt its significance. From the depths of his misery, he told himself, while he faced her, that she would be perfect if she were only a little different — if she were only "that kind of woman." She possessed a thousand virtues, he was aware; she was generous, honourable according to her lights, loyal, brave, charitable, and unselfish. But it is the woman of a single virtue, not a thousand, that a man exalts.

"Yes, I suppose it always meant less to you than to others," he repeated dully.

"It wasn't my fault — why do you blame me?" she responded quickly. "Men hold a woman to blame when she doesn't love, however ill they may use her as soon as she does it. Oh, I know you're not that sort — you needn't explain it. You are different, and this is why I am half loving you even now. Last night when I awoke and heard a mocking-bird in the cedars, I told myself that I could never be happy away from you. But when the light came, I wanted to see the world, and I forgot you. I'm only twenty-one. I'm too young to tie myself down forever."

"My mother married when she was sixteen," he replied, partly because he could think of nothing else to say at the moment, partly because he honestly entertained the masculine conviction that the precedent in some way constituted an argument.

"And a sensible marriage it was!" retorted Molly with scorn. "She's had a hard enough lot and you know it." In her earnestness she had almost assumed the position of Sarah's champion.

"Yes, I reckon it is," he returned, wounded to the quick. "I've no right to ask you to exchange what they offer you for a life like my mother's."

Fulness of emotion lent dignity to his words, but if he had shown indifference instead of tenderness, it would probably have served him better. She was so sure of Abel — so ready to accept as a matter of course the fact that she could rely on him.

"So you want it to be all over between us?" he asked.

"I don't want to be tied — I don't think I ought to be." Her tone was firm, but she plucked nervously at a bit of crape on the sleeve of Mrs. Gay's gown.

"Perhaps you're right," he replied quietly. He had spoken in a stiff and constrained manner, with little show of his suffering, yet all the while he felt that a band of iron was fastened across his brain, and the physical effect of this pressure was almost unendurable. He wanted to ease his swollen heart by some passionate outburst, but an obstinate instinct, which was beyond his control, prevented his making a ridiculous display of his emotion. The desire to curse aloud, to hurl defiant things at a personal deity, was battling within him, but instead of yielding to it he merely repeated:

"I reckon you're right — it wouldn't be fair to you in the end."

"I hope you haven't any hard feeling toward me," she said presently, sweetly commonplace.

"Oh, no, I haven't any hard feeling. Good-bye, Molly."

"Good-bye, Abel."

Turning away from her, he walked rapidly back along the short grassy path over the snowdrops. As she watched him, a lump rose in her throat, and she asked herself what would happen if she were to call after him, and, when he looked round, run straight into his arms? She wanted to run into his arms, but her knowledge of herself told her that once there she would not want to stay. The sense of bondage would follow — on his part the man's effort to dominate; on hers the woman's struggle for the integrity of personality. As long as he did not possess her she knew that emotion would remain paramount over judgment — that the longing to win her would triumph over the desire to improve what he had won. But once surrendered, the very strength and singleness of his love would bring her to cage. The swallow flights and the freedom of the sky would be over, and she would either beat her wings hopelessly against the bars, or learn to eat from his hand, to sing presently at his whistle. Had passion urged her, this hesitancy would have been impossible. Then she would either have seen none of these things, or, having seen them, she would have dared greatly. She was too cool, too clear-sighted, perhaps, for a heroine of romance. The single virtue that has fed vampire-like on the blood of the others, the abject attitude to the heart, the moral chicanery of sex — she would have none of these things.

"I am very fond of him, but I want to live — to live," she said, raising her arms with a free movement to the sky, while she looked after his figure. "Poor Abel," she added after a moment, "he will never get over it."

Then, while the sigh of compassion was still on her lips, she was arrested by a scene which occurred in the sunny meadow. From the brook a woman's form had risen like a startled rabbit at Abel's approach. wavering against the background of willows, as if uncertain whether to advance or to retreat. The next instant, as though in obedience to some mental change, it came quickly forward and faced the miller with an upward movement of the hands to shelter a weeping face.

"I believe — I really believe it is Judy Hatch," said Molly to herself, and there was a faint displeasure in her voice. "I wonder what she is doing hiding down there in the willows?"

Judy Hatch it was, and at sight of Abel she had sprung up in terror from the edge of the brook, poised for flight like a wild thing before the gun of the hunter. He saw that her eyes were red and swollen from weeping, her face puckered and distorted. The pain in his own heart was so acute that for a moment he felt a sensation of relief in finding that he was not alone in his agony — that the universal portion of suffering had not been allotted entirely to himself, as he had imagined. Had she smiled, he would have brushed past her in silence, but because of her agitated and despairing look, he called her name, and when she turned toward him in bewilderment, held out his hand. It was a small accident that brought them together — nothing more than the fact that she had stooped to bathe her eyes in the stream before going on to the turnpike.

"Don't go, Judy; you're in trouble, I see, and so am I," he said with bitterness.

"Oh Mr. Revercomb!" she blurted out. "I didn't want anybody to catch me in such a pass!"

"I'm not anybody, Judy; I'm a poor devil that was born without sense enough to plough his furrow straight."

She was a plain woman, but a pretty one would have sent him off in a panic over the meadow. He had had his lesson from a pretty woman, and the immediate effect of it was to foster the delusion that there was a mysterious affinity between ugliness and virtue.

"Tell me what it is, Judy. Can I help you?" he said kindly.

"It's nothin'. I am always in trouble," she answered, sobbing outright behind her sunbonnet. "Between pa and my stepmother, there isn't a spot on earth I can rest in."

She looked at him and he knew immediately, from her look, that neither Solomon Hatch nor his second wife was responsible for Judy's unhappiness. For a mocking instant it occurred to him that she might have cherished a secret and perfectly hopeless passion for himself. That she might be cherishing this passion for another, he did not consider at the moment — though the truth was that her divinity inhabited not a mill, but a church, and was, therefore, she felt, trebly unapproachable. But her worship was increased by this very hopelessness, this elevation. It pleased her that the object of her adoration should bend always above her — that in her dreams he should preach a perpetual sermon and wear an imperishable surplice.

"Well, I'm sorry for you," said Abel; "I'm sorry for you." And indeed he was. "You're a good, pious, virtuous girl — just the sort of girl a man would want for his wife."

"I try to be good and I don't see why I should be so — so unhappy," sobbed Judy. "There ain't a better hand for raisin' chickens and flowers and young lambs in the county."

Again she looked up at him through her tears, and the fool that lies at the bottom of all generous hearts rose instantly to her bait. As he had once been the sport of his desire, so he was to become now the sport of his pity.

"Any man ought to be proud to have you for his wife, Judy," he said.

"Ought they, Abel?" she replied passionately, with the vision of the Reverend Orlando rising in serene detachment before her.

For a moment he gazed down at her without speaking. It was pleasant to feel pity; it was more than pleasant to receive gratitude in return. On the raw wound in his heart something that was almost like a cooling balm had been poured.

"God knows I'm sorry for you, Judy," he repeated; "we're both in the same boat, so I ought to be. Come to me if I can ever help you, and you'll find you may count on my word."

"I — I'll remember, Abel," she answered tearfully, but her thoughts were of a certain pair of purple velvet slippers, begun in rivalry of Blossom's black ones, which she was embroidering in pansies.

As he turned away from her into the crowd of silver willows beside the brook, she stood looking after him with the abstracted gaze of one who dwells not in the world of objects, but in the exalted realm of visions.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH PITY MASQUERADES AS REASON

As Abel crossed the poplar log he said to himself, "I shall not think of Her again"; when he reached the end of the willows he said, "I must not think of Her again"; and at the beginning of the kitchen garden, he changed this to, "I will not think of Her again."

The scent of hyacinths, which floated from a row blooming on either side of the white paling gate, whipped his senses into revolt, and he quickened his steps in a vain effort to escape from the tormenting fragrance. Yet even while he fled from his pain he knew in his heart that he did not desire the strength to turn and renounce it — that to banish the image of Molly from his thoughts was to drive the bloom from the meadow, the perfume from the air, the sunlight from the orchard. Spring became as desolate as winter when it was robbed of the thought of her.

By the house a late pear-tree was in blossom, and the sunshine, falling obliquely across it, awoke a white fire in its branches, as if piles of new fallen snow had warmed suddenly to a reflected flame. Beneath it Sarah Revercomb was sowing portulaca seeds in a rockery she had made over a decaying stump. Her back was strained with bending, but not once had she stopped to gaze at the glorified pear-tree overhead. All her life she had distinguished carefully between the aristocracy and the common herd of blossoms, and not all the magic gilding of the spring sunshine could delude her into regarding the useful product of a fruit-tree as a flower.

"I don't see why you want to go wearin' yo' Sunday clothes every day, Abel," she observed as he was about to pass her.

"Why shouldn't I?" he retorted with the defiance of despair.

Something in his voice caused the woman who had borne him to raise herself from her stooping posture, and stare at him with an amazed and incredulous expression, as if she were asking herself when and where she could have given him birth. In her mental vision, which saw only one thing at a time, but saw that thing with great distinctness, the idea of love slowly presented itself as the cause of such a reversal of the natural order as a Sunday suit on week days. Her conceptions of life were derived so closely from facts, or from a logic as inexorable as facts, that she was conscious of a baffled and exasperated sensation when she was confronted by anything intangible which would not, as she put it in her own mind, "get out of her way." It was natural enough, she knew, that a material object or condition should possess the power to block one's progress or even to change the normal current of one's existence. Such things had happened a dozen times at least in her limited experience. But when a mere emotion assumed the importance and the reality of a solid body, she was seized by the indignant astonishment with which a mathematician might regard the differential calculus if it ceased suddenly to behave as he expected it to do. She had always controlled her own feelings with severity, and it was beyond the power of her imagination to conceive a possible excuse — unless it was a disordered liver — for another person's inability to do the same. Besides, as she had often asked herself, what was the use of not controlling your feelings when you came to think about it?

"Thar ain't a bit of use in yo' goin' on this way over that girl, Abel," she said presently, as an annotation to his last remark, "you'd better jest start along about yo' work, an' put her right straight out of yo' mind. I al'ays knew thar warn't a particle of sense in it."

There was sound reason in her advice, and he did not attempt to dispute it. The unfortunate part was, however, that in the very soundness of her reason lay its point of offence. Philosophy was dealing again in her high handed fashion with emotion, and emotion, in its turn, was treating philosophy with an absence of that respectful consideration to which she was entitled. Abel knew quite as well as Sarah that there wasn't "a particle of sense" in his thinking of Molly; but the possession of this knowledge did not interfere in the least with either the intensity or the persistence of his thought of her. His mind seemed to have as much control over the passion that raged in his heart as an admonishing apostle of peace has over a mob that is headed toward destruction. At the moment he felt that the last straw — the one burden more that he could not bear — was to be told to follow what he admitted to be the only clear and rational course. Turning away from her without a reply, he rushed through the open gate and across the road and the poplar log into the friendly shelter of his mill.

"What he needs is to wear himself out and to settle down into a sort of quiet despair," thought Sarah as she looked after him. Then lifting her trowel, she returned with a sigh to the sowing of portulaca seeds in her rockery.

In the twilight of the mill, where he was hunted through the door by the scent of flowers, he went over to the shelf of books in a corner, and taking down the volumes one by one, turned their leaves with a trembling and eager hand, as though he were seeking some thought so strong, so steadying, that once having secured it, the rush of his passion would beat in vain against its impregnable barrier. But the books, like Sarah, treated life in the grand manner and with the fine detachment of philosophy. He could get no assistance from them, because they only told him that he would be better and happier if he acted always as a rational being, and this did not help him. They told him, also, in what seemed a burst of unanimity, that human nature would be better and happier if it were not human nature, but something else. Some of the writers believed that this result might be attained by making many laws and some of them were of the opinion that the way to it was to undo a majority of the laws that were already made. All admitted that the world was very badly off and that something must be done, and done very quickly, to relieve it — but the trouble was that each writer's remedy was different from every other writer's, and yet each writer's was the imperative, the essential one. There was a single point on which they agreed, and that was that human nature would be better and happier if it were different. But poor human nature, having known this ever since it left the tree-tops, went on, just the same, being all the time the thing that it was obliged to be.

"There's no help for me here," said Abel, and moving away from the shelf, he leaned his arms in the window, and looked out on the dripping wheel and the crooked sycamore, which was decorated with little round greenish balls of flowers. On the hot agony in his heart the languorous Southern spring laid a cooling and delicate touch. Beneath the throb of his pain he felt the stirring of formless, indefinite longings, half spiritual, half physical, which seemed older and more universal than his immediate suffering.

For six weeks the canker gnawed at his heart, and he gave no sign of its presence. Then relief came to him for a few hours one day when he drifted into a local meeting in Applegate and entered into a discussion of politics. At the end he spoke for twenty minutes, and when his speech was over, he told himself that at last he had found something that might take the place of love in his life. The game of politics showed itself to him in all the exciting allurement of a passion.

A gentle mannered old clergyman, with a dream-haunted face and the patient waiting attitude of one who had watched for miracles for fifty years, spoke to him when the meeting was breaking up, and after a brief conversation, invited him to address a club of workingmen on the following Friday. Though the old clergyman had spent half a century in a futile endeavour to persuade every man to love his neighbour as himself, and thereby save society the worry and the expense of its criminal code, he still hoped on with the divine far-sighted hope of the visionary — hoped not because he saw anything particularly encouraging in his immediate outlook, but because it was his nature to hope and he would probably have continued to do so had Fate been so unjust as to consign him to an Inferno. He was one of those in whom goodness is a natural instinct, and whose existence, even in a more or less inglorious obscurity, leavens the entire lump of humanity. Mr. Mullen, who regarded him with the active suspicion with which he viewed all living examples of Christian charity, spoke of him condescendingly as a "man of impracticable ideas" — a phrase which introduced his index prohibitory of opinions. But the old clergyman, having attained a serviceable sense of humour, as well as a heavenly fortitude, went on quietly doing good after the fashion in which he was made. In his impracticable way he had solved the problem of life by an indiscriminate application of the Golden Rule. This solution had appeared to him so simple and yet so complete, that he had spent fifty years, with but moderate success, in persuading others to adopt it. At the end he was not what Mr. Mullen would have called a "shining light," in the Church, yet his bread cast upon the waters had returned to him in quantities, which, though small and moist, were sufficient, with stringent economy, to keep body and soul together. One of these quantities he discerned now in the eager young countryman, whose face accompanied him through a trying day, and helped to brighten his self-sacrificing labours.

To Abel, driving home some hours later in his gig, the old clergyman was present less as a mental image, than as a vague yet impelling influence for good. The impression was still in his thoughts, when he overtook Judy Hatch a mile or two before reaching the cross-roads, and stopped to ask her to drive with him as far as her cottage. At sight of her wan and haggard face, he felt again that impulse of pity, which seemed while it lasted to appease the violence of his suffering.

"I haven't seen you to speak to for a long time," he observed, as she mounted over the wheel to her place at his side.

"Not since that day by the brook," she answered, and he flinched as if a raw wound had been touched.

Though she did not look at him, he was conscious, through some subtle undercurrent of feeling, that her spirit was drenched with the young summer, with the pulsing life of the June forest and the scent of wild grape and honeysuckle which filled the air. Her face was lifted to the fluted leaves of a sycamore, from which the song of a thrush rippled like running water, and there was the rapt and holy look in her eyes which gave her, if he had only known it, a likeness to one of the minor saints in a primitive Italian painting. So little, however, did her passion use her body as its medium that, after glancing casually at her parted lips, he decided that she was probably counting the eggs she had set to hatch in her hen-house, and hesitated to interrupt the absorbing business of her calculations. Mentally, he regarded her with the ungrudging respect which a man of any sort instinctively yields to a woman who obviously disdains to ensnare his judgment in the mesh of his senses. The palpitations of her spirit were communicated to him in so elusive a process, that, even while he felt the stir of his pulses, he was not aware that it was due in any measure to the woman at his side. If she had been pretty — if she had been even attractively plain — it would hardly have occurred to him that her intense and breathless expression was associated with the hatching of chickens; but, like other philosophers of whom he had never heard, it was impossible for him to distinguish the qualities of the thing-in-itself from the qualities of the phenomenon beneath his eyes. Had he winnowed his superficial impressions the underlying thought would probably have been: "No woman with a bosom as flat as that can have any nonsense about her." From the first moment of their meeting he had never doubted that it was this lack of "nonsense" which had attracted him. He liked her evident indifference to his opinion of her, and he liked, too, her listless silence, when she sat, with clasped hands, gazing straight ahead through the shadowy colonnade of the woods. Not once had her troubled look wandered from the moist dead leaves on the ground, to the misty edges of the forest, where small wild flowers thronged in a pale procession of pipsissewa, ladies' tresses, and Enchanter's nightshade.

"Did you know that the Gays are in Europe?" asked Judy, turning her eyes on his face for the first time.

His heart gave a throb and was quiet.

"No, I hadn't heard it," he replied in an arid voice.

"They say it's more than likely Molly will marry Mr. Jonathan. He's waitin' on her."

Reaching for the whip, Abel touched the mare lightly on her glossy flank. After that single pang his suffering had left him — for six weeks of sleepless nights and tormented days had exhausted his endurance and reduced him to a condition of emotional lassitude. In his brief reaction from spiritual revolt into a state of apathetic submission, he approached his mother's permanent austerity of mind as closely as he was ever likely to do in the whole of his experience. The mere possibility of a fresh awakening of feeling filled him with aversion. At the moment he had as profound a distrust as Sarah of the immaterial elements; and looking ahead, he saw his future stretching before him as firm and flat as the turnpike which he was approaching. Delight and despair were equally distasteful to him. He shrank as instinctively from the thought of love as a man shrinks from re-opening an old wound which is still sensitive to the touch, though it has ceased to ache. And so prone is human nature to affirm its inherent belief in the eternity of the present, that he was assured, not only that this was the most desirable point of view he had ever reached, but that it was entirely out of the question that he should ever travel beyond it to another. Forgetting the many times when he had revolted from advice merely because it was "sensible," he began calmly to arrange his life in accordance with that law of practical expediency against which a month ago he had so hotly rebelled.

As they drove out of the woods, and turned into the sunken road beyond the ordinary which led in the direction of Solomon Hatch's farm, he withdrew his gaze from the head of his mare and looked attentively at his companion.

"I hope you are having an easier time, Judy," he said.

Her eyes brimmed. "You are the only person who cares about that, Abel."

"Why shouldn't I care? You are the best and the cleverest girl I know," he returned.

Her gratitude fanned his sympathy, which was beginning to smoulder, and he felt again the pleasant sense of being in the position of the benefactor rather than of the benefited. His eyes rested without shrinking on her sallow face, with the faint bluish tinge to the eyelids, and on her scant drab coloured hair, which was combed smoothly back from her forehead — and while he looked his pity clothed itself in the softer and gentler aspect of reason. "She ought to be happy," he thought. "It's a shame they should lead her such a life! It's a shame some good man doesn't fall in love with her and marry her. She's really not so plain, after all. I've seen many women who were worse looking than she is." Unknown to him, an illusion was gradually shedding colour and warmth on his vision of her. Mentally, he had endowed her with all the sober and saner virtues to which his present mood was committed — though he had, in reality, no better reason for so doing than the fact that she evidently esteemed him and that she was deserving of pity. The discordant forces of passion no longer disturbed the calm and orderly processes of his mind, and he told himself that he saw clearly, because he saw stark images of facts, stripped not only of the glamour of light and shade, but even of the body of flesh and blood. Life spread before him like a geometrical figure, constructed of perfect circles and absolutely conformable to the rules and the principles of mathematics. That these perfect circles should ever run wild and become a square was clearly unthinkable. Because his nature was now quiescent it was impossible for him to conceive of it in motion.

And all the while, in that silence, which seemed so harmless while it was, in reality, so dangerous, the repressed yet violent force in Judy wrought on his mood in which bare sense and bare thought were unprotected by any covering of the love which had clothed them as far back as he could remember. That breathless, palpitating appeal for happiness — an appeal which is as separate from beauty as the body of flesh is separate from the garment it wears — was drawing him slowly yet inevitably toward the woman at his side. Her silence — charged as it was with the intoxicating spirit of June — had served the purpose of life as neither words nor gestures could have done. It had reconciled him to her presence in the very moment that made him conscious of the strength of his pity.

Presently, as they drove through the burned out clearing, she spoke again.

"I wonder why you are always so good to me, Abel?"

He liked the honest sound of the words, and he did nor know that before uttering them she had debated in her heart whether it was worth while to marry Abel since she could not marry Mr. Mullen. Marriage, having few illusions for her, possessed, perhaps for that reason, the greater practical value. She was unhappy with her stepmother in a negative way, but so impervious had she become to casual annoyances, that she hardly weighed the disadvantages of her home against the probable relinquishment of Mrs. Mullen's washing day after her marriage to Abel.

Her soul was crushed like a trapped creature in the iron grip of a hopeless passion, and her insensibility to the lesser troubles of life was but the insensibility of such a creature to the stings of the insects swarming around its head. The outcome of her drive with Abel aroused only a dull curiosity in her mind. Some years ago, in the days before Mr. Mullen, she would probably have fallen a helpless victim to the miller had his eyes wandered for an instant in her direction. But those days and that probability were now over forever.

Unfortunately, however, it is not given to a man to look into the soul of a woman except through the inscrutable veil of his own personality. Had Abel pierced that purple calico dress and witnessed the pathetic struggle in Judy's bosom, his next words would hardly have been uttered.

"I wish I could do something to make you happier, Judy."

She looked at him with mysterious, brooding eyes, and he was conscious again of the attraction, as subtile and as penetrating as a perfume, which she exhaled in the stillness, and which vanished as soon as she broke the quivering intensity of the silence. That this attraction was merely the unconscious vibration of her passion for another man, which shed its essence in solitude as naturally as a flower sheds its scent, did not occur to him. Without his newly awakened pity it could not have moved him. With it he felt that he was powerless to resist its appeal.

"Why shouldn't I be good to you, Judy?" he repeated.

Tears overflowed her eyes at his words. Looking at her, he saw her not as she was, but as he desired that she should be; and this desire, he knew, sprang from his loneliness and from his need of giving sympathy to some one outside of himself. The illusion that surrounded her bore no resemblance to the illusion of love — yet it was akin to it in the swiftness and the completeness with which it was born. If any one had told him an hour ago that he was on the verge of marriage to Judy, he would have scoffed at the idea — he who was the heartbroken lover of Molly! Yet this sudden protecting pity was so strong that he found himself playing with the thought of marriage, as one plays in lofty moments with the idea of a not altogether unpleasant self-abnegation. He did not love Judy, but he was conscious of an overwhelming desire to make Judy happy — and like all desires which are conceived in a fog of uncertainty, its ultimate form depended less upon himself than it did upon the outward pressure of circumstances.

"I sometimes think it's more than anybody can stand to go on living as I do," said Judy, breaking the silence, "to slave an' slave an' never to get so much as a word of thanks for it."

For a moment he said nothing. Then turning he looked hard into her humid eyes, and what he saw there made him bend over and take her hand.

"Do you think I could make you happier, Judy?" he asked.

BOOK SECOND

THE CROSS-ROADS

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH YOUTH SHOWS A LITTLE SEASONED

Some six months after Abel's parting from Molly, he might have been seen crossing the lawn at Jordan's Journey on a windy November morning, and even to a superficial observer it would have been evident that certain subtle modifications had been at work in his soul. Disappointed love had achieved this result with a thoroughness which victorious love could not have surpassed. Because he had lost Molly, he had resolved, in his returning sanity, that he would make of himself the man who might have won Molly had she known him in his completeness. And in the act of resolving, his character had begun to ripen into the mellowness of maturity.

The day was bleak, and something of this external bleakness was reflected in the look which he raised to the ivy draped dormer-windows in the hooded roof. Small greyish clouds were scudding low above the western horizon, and the sorrel waste of broomsedge was rolling high as a sea. The birds, as they skimmed over this billowy expanse, appeared blown, despite their efforts, on the wind that swept in gusts out of the west. On the lawn at Jordan's Journey the fallen leaves were dancing madly like a carnival in rough carousal. Watching them it was easy to imagine that they found some frenzied joy in this dance of death — the end to which they had moved from the young green of the bud through the opulent abundance of the summer. The air was alive with their sighing. They rustled softly under foot as Abel walked up the drive, and then, whipped by a strong gust, fled in purple and wine-coloured multitudes to the shelter of the box hedges, or, rising in flight above the naked boughs, beat against the closed shutters before they came to rest against the square brick chimneys on the roof.

Beneath the trees a solitary old negro was spreading manure over the grass, hauling it in a wheelbarrow from a pile somewhere in the barnyard. Back and forth he passed, scattering the fine manure from his spade until the wheelbarrow was empty, when he replenished it in the barnyard and returned to his sprinkling. All the while he smoked steadily a long corncob pipe, and to watch him at his task, was to receive an impression that the hauling of manure was sufficient to fill one's life with dignity and contentment. The work appeared no longer a menial employment, but a sober and serious share of the great problem of production.

"That's the way I intend to go about the work of my mill," thought Abel, as he watched him. "When you do it like that it really makes very little difference what you are doing. It all comes to good." A minute before his thoughts had been on the new roller mill he had recently bought and was now working in his primitive little building, which he had slightly remodelled. The next thing to go, he supposed, would be the old wooden wheel, with its brilliant enamel of moss, and within five years he hoped to complete the reconstruction of his machinery on lines that were scientific rather than picturesque. His water power was good, and by the time he could afford an entire modern equipment, he would probably have all the grain at his door that he was ready to handle. Then he began to wonder, as he had often done of late, if the work of the farm and the mill might be left safely to Abner and Archie when he went up to Richmond to the General Assembly, in the event of his future election? Already he had achieved a modest local fame as a speaker — for his voice expressed the gradual political awakening of his class. Though he was in advance of his age, it was evident, even to the drowsy-eyed, that he was moving in the direction whither lagging progress was bound. In the last eighteen months he had devoured the books of the political economists, and he had sucked in theories of social philosophy as a child sucks in milk. That the business of the politician is not to reshape theories, but to readjust conditions he was ready to admit, yet impelled by a strong religious conviction, by a belief in the determining power of a practical Christianity, he was sharing the slowly expanding dream of his century — the dream of a poverty enriched by knowledge, of a social regeneration that would follow an enlightened and instructed proletariat. Ripples from the thought waves of the world had reached him in the dusty corners of his mill at Old Church. Since no man thinketh to himself, he could no more have escaped the mental impulsion of his time than he could have arrested his embryonic development from the invertebrate to the vertebrate. His mind being open, ideas had entered, and having entered, they had proceeded immediately to take active possession. He was serving a distant Utopia of industrial democracy as ardently as a lover serves his mistress.

As for his actual mistress, she had become not only visionary, but enskied. Some months ago, while his wound was still fresh, he had not suffered his thoughts to dwell on her because of the violence of the pain. Pride as well as common sense, he had told himself during the first weeks of his loss, demanded that he should banish her image from his mind. Though he had never, even in his first anger, called her "a light woman," he had come perilously near the feeling that she had grazed the skirts of impropriety with a recklessness which no sober minded son of Sarah Revercomb could countenance for a minute. His very success as a miller depended upon an integrity of character which permitted no compromise with the fundamental moralities. Youth is the period of harsh judgments, and a man seldom learns until he reaches thirty that human nature is made up not of simples, but of compounds. What Abel had never divined was that Molly, like himself, might approach the angelic in one mood and fall short of the merely human in another — that she, also, was capable of moments of sublimation and of hours of recusancy. There were the ashes of a poet in her soul as in his, and to contain the ashes of a poet one must have been first the crucible for purifying flames.

But it was six months ago that he had condemned her, and since then the subtle modifications had worked in his habit of thought. As the soreness passed from his heart, he had nursed the scar much as a crusader might have cherished a wound out of the Holy Wars. From the actual conditions of life in which he had loved her, he now beheld her caught up into the zone of ideal and impossible beauty. Through the outer covering of her flesh he could see her soul shine, as the stars shone through the web of purple twilight on the marshes. From his earlier craving for possession, his love had grown, through frustration and disappointment, into a simpler passion for service.

"Well, one has to find out things," he said to himself on this November morning, while he watched the old negro at his work. Some red leaves whirled into his face, and the wind, lifting the dark hair from his forehead, showed three heavy furrows between his knitted brows. He appeared a little older, a little braver, a little wiser, yet there was about him still the look of superb physical vitality which had been the result of a youth spent in the open fields.

"Howdy, Uncle Boaz," he said to the old negro, who approached with his wheelbarrow. "Your folks have all gone away for good, haven't they?"

"Hit looks dat ar way, marster, hit sutney do look dat ar way."

"Well, you keep good grass here all the same."

"Dar ain' but one way ter do hit, suh, en dat's ter dung hit," replied Uncle Boaz, and he remarked a minute afterwards, as he put down the lowered handles of the wheelbarrow, and stood prodding the ashes in his pipe, "I'se gwinter vote fur you, Marse Abel, I sholy is ——"

"Thank you, Uncle Boaz!"

"En I'se got a sack er co'n I'd be moughty bleeged ter git ground up fur hominy meal ——"

With a laugh Abel passed on through the side-garden, and entered the leafless shrubbery that bordered the

Haunt's Walk. The old negro had disturbed his dream, which had been of Molly in her red stockings, with the red ribbon binding her curls. Then he thought of Spot, the aged hound — "That dog must have lived to be seventeen years old," he said aloud in the effort to smother the sharp pang at his heart, "I remember how fond old Reuben was of him even as a puppy. He would never let him run hares with anybody except himself." It was seventeen years ago that Spot was a puppy and he a boy — and now the one was dust with old Reuben, and the other had settled down so effectually that he was going to marry Judy in a fortnight. At least Judy was a good woman — nobody had ever said a word against her — and she would make him a good wife. That, after all, was what a farmer must think of — a good, saving wife, without any foolishness about her, who would be thrifty and lend a hand at his work when he needed it. All the rest was nonsense when once a man married. Dreams were all very well in their way, but realities and not dreams, after all, were things he must live with. Looking ahead he saw his future stretching smooth and firm, like the flat white turnpike that dragged its solid length into the distance. On that road there was no place for the absurdity of red stockings! And so, in the absence of all elation, only the grim sense of duty in the doing soothed him as he made his way to Solomon Hatch's cottage.

On the back porch he found Judy deftly taking butter out of the churn, and he watched her while she worked the soft lumps with a wooden paddle in a large yellow bowl. Though he would have been the last to suspect it — for passion like temptation appeared to him to beset the beautiful alone — Judy, in her homely way, was also a crucible, and the little earthern pot of her body was near to bursting at the moment from the violence of the flames within. She had just seen a black coated figure in a red gig spin by on the road, and for one blissful minute, she had permitted herself a flight of fancy, in which she was the bride, not of Abel Revercomb, but of Orlando Mullen. To sit in that red wheeled gig, touching the sleeve of his black coat! To stitch the frayed seams in his silk waistcoat! To iron his surplices as only she could iron when the divine fury seized her! To visit his poor and his afflicted! To lift her swooning gaze every Sunday, with a sense of possession, to that pulpit! For a minute only the rapture lasted, and all the time, she went on placidly making butter in the large yellow bowl. She was in the mood to commit sublime follies and magnificent indiscretions. For the sake of a drive in that red wheeled gig she would have foresworn Abel at the altar. For the ecstasy of ironing those surplices she would have remained a spinster forever.

"That's nice butter, Judy," remarked her lover, and believed that he had paid her a tribute peculiarly suited to the complexion of her soul.

His gaze followed the drab sweep of her hair, which was combed straight back from her forehead. Her eyes were looking heavenward while she worked, yet they caught no beam, no colour from her celestial visions. Small hectic splotches burned in the centre of her cheeks, and her thin lips were pressed tightly together as though she bit back a cry. Sometimes she would remain dumb for an hour in his presence, while her thoughts soared like birds in the blue region of dreams. She indulged her imagination in grotesque but intoxicating reveries, in which she passed nobly and with honour through a series of thrillingly romantic adventures; and, in fact, only ten minutes before Abel's arrival, she had beheld herself and the young clergyman undergoing a rapturous, if slightly unreal, martyrdom, as missionaries to the Chinese.

Her dreams dropped suddenly, with broken wings, in their flight, for her stepmother, a small sickly woman, with a twisted smile, looked out through the dining-room window, and remarked facetiously:

"You all don't look much like a co'tin couple to my eyes."

"I've been admiring her butter," replied Abel, who was always unduly regardful of his English in the presence of Mrs. Hatch.

"She's a good hand at butter when she chooses to be, but she has her ups and downs like the rest of us."

"All of us have them, I suppose," he rejoined, and Mrs. Hatch drew in her head.

"I never imagined that you got put out, Judy," he said, forgetting the tears that had led him to his sacrifice; "you always seem so quiet and sober."

She glanced up, for there was a sound of wheels on the road, and Mr. Mullen drove by again, sitting very erect, and uncovering, with a graceful bend, to some one who was visible at the front. Her face flushed suddenly to the colour of brickdust, and she felt that the confusion in her soul must fill the universe with noise. Quiet and sober, indeed, if he could only have heard it!

But Abel was busy with his own problems, while his gaze followed Mr. Mullen's vanishing back, which had, even from a distance, a look of slight yet earnest endeavour. He still liked the young rector for his sincerity and his uprightness, but he had found, on the whole, that he could approach his God more comfortably when the straight and narrow shadow of the clergyman did not come between.

"Aren't you going to pat it any more?" he asked presently, returning to his consideration of the butter.

Picking up a square linen cloth, Judy dipped it into a basin of brine, and, after wringing it out, carefully folded it over the yellow bowl.

"All the buttermilk is out of it," she answered, and thought of the unfinished pair of purple slippers laid away in tissue paper upstairs in her bureau drawer. As a married woman could she. with virtue, continue to embroider slippers in pansies for her rector? These had been laid aside on the day of her engagement to Abel, but she yearned now to riot in purple shades with her needle. While she listened with a detached mind to Abel's practical plans for the future, her only interest in the details lay in the fact that they would, in a measure, insure the possibility of a yearly offering of slippers. And while they looked into each other's eyes, neither suspected for a moment the existence of a secret chamber in the other's soul. All appeared plain and simple on the surface, and Judy, as well as Abel, was honestly of the opinion that she understood perfectly the situation and that the passionate refusal of her heart was the only element that threatened the conventional security of appearances.

She was in the morbid condition of mind when the capacity for feeling seems concentrated on a single centre of pain. Her soul revolved in a circle, and outside of its narrow orbit there was only the arid flatness which surrounds any moment of vivid experience. The velvet slippers, which might have been worn by the young clergyman, possessed a vital and romantic interest in her thoughts, but the mill and the machinery of which Abel was speaking showed to her merely as sordid and mechanical details of existence.

Looking at her suddenly, he realized that she had heard nothing of what he was saying. If he had looked deeper still he would have seen the tragedy of her lonely little soul spinning the web of its perishing illusion. Of all the martyrdoms allotted to love's victims, she was enduring the bitterest, which is the martyrdom of frustration. Yet because she appeared dull and undesirable on the surface, he had declined, with the rest of Old Church, to regard her emotions any less casually than he regarded her complexion.

"Well, I ought to be a proud man to have you, Judy," he remarked, and rose to his feet.

"I hope neither of us will ever regret it," she returned.

"Not if I can help it," he said, and, putting his arm around her, he drew her to him and kissed her lips. It was the second time he had kissed her, and on the first occasion she had burst into hysterical weeping. He did not know that it was the only caress she had ever received, and that she had wept because it had fallen so far short of what her imagination had deluded her into expecting. Now, though she had herself well in hand and gave no visible sign of her disappointment, there was a fierce, though unspoken, protest in her heart. "To think that after all the nights I've lain awake an' wondered what 'twas like, it should turn out to be so terrible flat," she said bitterly to herself.

"It's just a fortnight off now, Judy," he remarked gently, if not tenderly.

"I hope your mother will get on with me, Abel."

"She sets great store by you now. You're pious, and she likes that even though you do go to the Episcopal church. I heard her say yesterday that it was a rare thing to see a girl find as much comfort in her religion as you do."

"You'll never want to come between me and my church work, will you, Abel? I do most of the Foreign Mission work, you know, an' I teach in Sunday school and I visit the sick every Friday."

"Come between? Why, it makes me proud of you! When I asked Mr. Mullen about marrying us, he said: 'She's been as good as a right hand to me ever since I came here, Revercomb.'"

"Tell me over again. What were his words exactly?"

"'She's been as good as a right hand to me, Revercomb,' that was what he said, and he added, 'She's the salt of the earth, that's the only way to describe her.' And now, goodbye, Judy, I must be going back to work."

Without glancing round, he went at his rapid stride down the narrow walk to the whitewashed gate, which hung loose on broken hinges. In the road he came face to face with Jonathan Gay, who was riding leisurely in the direction of Jordan's Journey.

"How are you, Revercomb? All well?"

"Yes, all well, thank you."

Turning in his tracks, he gazed thoughtfully after the rider for a moment.

"I wonder why he came out of his way instead of keeping to the turnpike?" he thought, and a minute later, "that's the third time he's come back since the family left Jordan's Journey."

CHAPTER II

THE DESIRE OF THE MOTH

AT THE gate before the Revercombs' house Blossom was standing in a dress of vivid blue.

"Are you going to a party?" Abel inquired as he reached her, and she answered impatiently:

"I promised to wear this dress over to Judy's, so that she could see how it is trimmed."

"Does she want a blue one?" he asked. It seemed to him little short of ludicrous that Judy should buy a new dress because she was going to be married to him; but in the presence of a custom so firmly entrenched behind the traditions of respectability, he knew that protest would be useless. Judy would deck out her unromantic person in wedding finery because finery was customary on such occasions.

"Of course we couldn't dress just alike, Abel," replied Blossom. His question had seemed foolish to her and her usual soft solemnity was ruffled by a passing irritation. "Judy's frock will be green, but she wants bretelles like these on it."

"Bretelles?" he repeated as incredulously as if he had possessed any but the vaguest idea of the article the word described. "Why didn't she wait until she was married, and then I'd have bought them for her," he added.

"Of course she wants her wedding clothes — all girls do," said Blossom, invoking tradition. "Are you coming in now. We're having dinner a little earlier."

She turned and moved slowly up the walk, while he followed, caressing the head of Moses, his spotted hound. From the kitchen he could hear Sarah Revercomb scolding the small negro, Mary Jo, whom she was training to wait on the table. On one side of the hearth grandmother sat very alert, waiting for her bowl of soup, into which Mary Jo was crumbling soft bits of bread, while across from her grandfather chuckled to himself over a recollection which he did not divulge.

At Abel's entrance, the old man stopped chuckling and inquired in an interested tone,

"Did you buy that ar steer, Abel?"

"Not yet, I'm to think it over and let Jim Bumpass know."

"Thar never was sech a man for steers," remarked grandmother, contemptuously. "Here he's still axin' about steers when he can't hist himself out of his cheer. If I were you, Abel, I'd tell him he'd better be steddyin' about everlastin' damnation instead of steers. Steers ain't goin' to haul him out of hell fire if he once gits down into it."

"Well, you can tell her, Abel," retorted grandfather, "that it's time enough to holler 'hell-fire!' when you begin to burn."

Mary Jo prevented a rejoinder by appearing with a napkin, which she tied under his wife's chin, and a little later the old woman could be heard drinking greedily her bowl of soup. She lived for food, yet, like most passions which have become exaggerated by concentration out of all proportion to the fact upon which they depend, the moment of fulfilment seemed always brief and unsatisfactory after the intensity of anticipation. To-day the trouble was that there were no carrots in the soup, and this omission reduced her to tears because it had blighted the hopes of her entire morning.

"An' I'd been hankerin' arter them carrots ever since breakfast," she whimpered.

"Don't cry, ma, I'll mash you up some nice ones for supper. That'll be something to look forward to," said Sarah, who might have won an immortal crown had such trophies been awarded to the patience of daughters-in-law. "So you didn't buy that steer, Abel?"

"No, I didn't buy it."

"Have you seen Judy to-day?"

"I stopped there on my way home. She was making butter, and we talked about buying an extra cow or two and letting Blossom and her send some to market."

"Well, it beats me!" observed Sarah, but whether her discomfiture was due to Judy's butter or to Abel's love making, she did not explain. On the whole the staidness of the courtship was pleasing to her. Her sense of decorum was flattered by it, for she had as little tolerance of the softer virtues as of the softer vices. It had been years since she had felt so indulgent toward her second son; yet in spite of the gratification his dejection afforded her, she was, as she had just confessed, utterly and entirely "beat." His period of common sense — of perfect and complete sobriety — had lasted for half a year, but she was too shrewd a woman to be deceived by the mere external calmness of appearances. She had had, moreover, a long experience with males of the Revercomb stock, and she knew that it was when their blood flowed quietest that there was the greatest danger of an ultimate "rousing." All her life she had lived in dread of this menace to respectability — to that strict observance of the letter of the social law for which the Hawtreys had stood for generations. On several occasions she had seen a Revercomb really "roused," and when this transformation was once achieved, not all the gravity of all the Hawtreys could withstand the force of it. And this terrible potential energy in her husband's stock would assert itself, she knew, after a period of tranquillity. She hadn't been married to a Revercomb for nothing, she had once remarked.

If anything could have put her into a cheerful humour, it would have been the depressed and solemn manner with which Abel went about the preparations for his marriage. The inflexible logic of Calvinism had passed into her fibre, until it had become almost an instinct with her to tread softly in the way of pleasure lest God should hear. Generations of joyless ancestors had imbued her with an ineradicable suspicion of human happiness — as something which must be paid for, either literally in its pound of flesh, or in a corresponding measure of the materials of salvation.

"I declar' things are goin' on so smooth that something must be gettin' ready to happen," she said anxiously to herself at least twenty times a day — for she had observed life, and in her opinion, the observation had verified the rigid principles of her religion. Do what you would the doctrines of original sin and predestination kept cropping up under the surface of existence. And so — "It looks all right on top, but you never can tell," was the habitual attitude of her mind.

When dinner was over, Abel went out to the mill, with Moses, the hound, trotting at his heels. The high wind was still blowing, and while he stood by the mill-race, the boughs of the sycamore rocked back and forth over his head with a creaking noise. At each swing of the branches a crowd of broad yellow leaves was torn from the stems and chased over the moving wheel to the open meadow beyond.

With the key of the mill in his hand, Abel stopped to gaze over the green knoll where he had once planned to build his house. Beyond it he saw the strip of pines, and he knew that the tallest of the trees had fallen uselessly beneath his axe. The great trunk still lay there, fast rotting to dust on the carpet of pine cones. He had never sold it for timber. He would never use it for the rafters of his home.

As he looked back now all that past life of his appeared to him fair and desirable. He remembered the early morning risings in his boyhood, and it seemed to him that he had enjoyed every one of them to its fullest — that it was only the present that showed stale and unprofitable in his eyes. A rosy haze obscured all that was harsh and unlovely in the past, and he thought of himself as always eager and enthusiastic then, as always finding happiness in the incidents that befell him. The year when he had gone away, and worked in a factory in order to educate himself, was revealed as a period of delightful promise, of wonderful opportunity. In remembering his love for Molly, he forgot the quarrels, the jealousies, the heartburnings, and recalled only the exquisite instant of their first lover's kiss. Then, he told himself that even while he had enjoyed his life, it had cheated him, and he would not live it over again if he could.

Turning presently in the other direction, he discerned a patch of vivid blue in the pasture, and knew that it was Blossom crossing the fields to Solomon Hatch's. "She's gone a good piece out of her road," he thought, and then, "I wonder why she doesn't marry? She might have anybody about here if she wasn't so particular." The vivid blue spot in the midst of the russet and brown landscape held his gaze for a moment; then calling Moses to his side, he unlocked the door of the mill and began counting the sacks of grist.

Outside, in the high wind, which made walking difficult, Blossom moved in the direction of the willow copse. Gay had promised to meet her, but she knew, from the experience of the last few months, that he would neither hasten his luncheon nor smoke a cigar the less in order to do so. As she pressed on the wind sang in her ears. She heard it like the sound of rushing wings in the broomsedge, and when it died down, she waited for it to rise again with a silken murmur in the red-topped orchard grass. She could tell from the sound whether the gust was still in the field of broomsedge or had swept on to the pasture.

In spite of her blue dress, in spite of the flush in her cheeks and the luminous softness in her eyes, the joy in her bosom fluttered on crippled wings. Gay was kind, he was gentle, he was even solicitous on the rare occasions when she saw him; but somehow — in some way, it was different from the ideal marriage of which she had dreamed. If he was kind, he was also casual. She had hoped once that love would fill her life, and now, to her despair, it looked as if it might be poured into a tea-cup. She had imagined that it would move mountains, and the most ordinary detail of living was sufficient to thrust it out of sight.

When she reached the brook, she saw Gay coming slowly along the Haunt's Walk, to the spring. As he walked, he blew little clouds of smoke into the air, and she thought, as he approached her, that the smell of his cigar was unlike the cigar of any other man she knew — that it possessed, in itself, a quality that was exciting and romantic. This trait in his personality — a disturbing suggestion of the atmosphere of a richer world — had fascinated her from the beginning, and after eighteen months of repeated disappointments, it still held her, though she struggled now in its power like a hare in a trap.

"So you're here!" he exclaimed as he reached her. Then, after a swift glance over the fields, he drew her into the shelter of the trees, and holding his cigar in his left hand, kissed her lips.

Closing her eyes, she leaned against him, while the scent of the tobacco intoxicated her with its train of happier associations.

"You're looking all right, though your letters have been rather jumpy. My dear girl, when you pounce on me like that you frighten me out of my wits. You really mustn't, you know."

"O Jonathan!" she gasped, and clung to him.

"Why, I had to manufacture some excuse on the instant for coming down. I couldn't tell what foolishness you'd be capable of if I didn't."

His tone was half caressing, yet beneath it there was a serious annoyance, which killed the suffering joy in her heart. She was slowly learning that it is not safe to remind the man of pleasure of his obligations, since he is attracted chiefly by his opportunities.

"The time was when you wanted to come just as much as I," she said.

"Don't I still? Haven't I proved it by telling a tremendous lie and rushing down here on the first train? Come, now, kiss me like a good girl and look cheerful. You've got to make up, you know, for all the trouble you've put me to."

She kissed him obediently, yielding to his casual embraces with a docility that would have charmed him had his passion been in its beginning instead of its decline.

"You're glad now you came, aren't you?" she asked presently, pleading to be reassured.

"Oh, yes, of course, I like it, but you mustn't write to me that way again."

Putting his arm closer about her, he pressed her to his side, and they sat in silence while the wind whistled in the tree-tops above them. From their shelter they could see the empty chimneys of Jordan's Journey, and a blurred and attenuated figure on the lawn, which was that of the old negro, who passed back and forth spreading manure. Some swallows with slate grey wings were flying over the roof, and they appeared from a distance to whirl as helplessly as the dead leaves.

"You do love me as much as ever, don't you, Jonathan?" she asked suddenly.

He frowned, staring at the moving figure of the old negro. Again she had blundered, for he was disinclined by temperament to do or say the thing that was expected of him.

"Why, of course I do," he answered after a pause.

She sighed and nestled against him, while his hand which had been on her shoulder, slipped to her waist. Her heart had turned to lead in her breast, and, like Judy, she could have wept because the reality of love was different from her virgin dreams.

CHAPTER III

ABEL HEARS GOSSIP AND SEES A VISION

Two nights before the wedding a corn shucking was held in the barn at Bottom's Ordinary — a usually successful form of entertainment, by which the strenuous labours of a score of able-bodied men were secured at the cost of a keg of cider and a kettle of squirrel stew. In the centre of the barn, which was dimly lighted by a row of smoky, strong-smelling kerosene-oil lanterns, suspended on pegs from the wall, there was a huge wooden bin, into which the golden ears were tossed, as they were stripped of the husks, by a circle of guests, ranging in years from old Adam at the head to the youngest son of Tim Mallory, an inquisitive urchin of nine, who made himself useful by passing the diminishing pitcher of cider. It was a frosty night, and the faces of the huskers showed very red above the knitted woollen comforters which wrapped their throats. Before each man there was a small pile of corn, still in the blade, and this was replenished when it began to dwindle by a band of workers in the moonlight beyond the open windows. In his effort to keep warm somebody had started a hymn, which was vigorously accompanied by a beating of numbed feet on the scattered husks on the floor. Above the volume of sound old Adam's quavering falsetto could be heard piping on like a cracked and discordant flute.

"O-ver thar, O-ver thar,
Th-ar's a la-nd of pure de-light.
O-ver th-ar,
We will la-y our bur-den do-wn.
An' re-ceive our gol-den cro-wn.
In that la-nd of pure de-light
O-ver th-ar."

"That's a cold hymn, an' unsuitable to the weather," remarked Tim Mallory at the end of the verse. "If you ask me, I'd say thar was mo' immediate comfort in singin' about the redness of hell-fire, an' how mortal close we're comin' to it."

"We don't want no impiousness at this here shuckin', Tim," observed William Ming, who occupied the position of host in Betsey's absence about the more important matter of supper. "You fill up with cider an' go at that thar pile befo' you."

"Then pass it on," replied Mallory, reaching for the jug of cider, which travelled in a regular orbit from old Adam's right hand round the circle to the neighbour on his left, who chanced to be Solomon Hatch.

"Speakin' of impiousness," remarked that sour-faced little man, "have you all heard the tales about Reuben Merryweather's gal sence she's had her windfall? Why, to see the way she trails her skirts, you'd think she was the real child of her father." Then rushing hurriedly to generalization at Abel's entrance, he added in a louder tone — "Ah, it's a sad pass for things to come to, an' the beginnin' of the end of public morality, when a gal that's born of a mischance can come to act as if a man was responsible for her. It ain't nothin' mo' nor less than flyin' in the face of the law, which reads different, an' if it keeps up, the women folks will be settin' up the same rights as men to all the instincts of natur."

Old Adam — the pride and wonder of the neighbourhood because he could still walk his half mile with the help of his son and still drink his share of cider with the help of nobody — bent over the heap of corn before him, and selecting an ear, divested it of the husks with a twirling, sleight-of-hand movement.

"They're losing virtue fast enough," he observed, throwing the naked ear into the bin and reaching for another. "Why, when I was young thar warn't nothin' in the way of meanness that a good woman wouldn't put up with. They'd shut thar eyes to Hagars, white or black, rather than lose the respect of men by seemin' to be aware of any immodesty."

"Ah, the times have changed now!" sighed Solomon Hatch, "but thar's one thing sho' to my mind, an' that is, that if a woman thinks she's goin' to attract men by pryin' an' peekin' into immorality an' settin' it straight ag'in, she's gone clean out of her head. Thar's got to be indecency in the world because thar al'ays has been. But a man sets a heap mo' sto' by his wife if she ain't too inquirin' upon the subject."

"True, true, Solomon," said old Adam, "I for one was al'ays set against teachin' women to read for fear they'd come to know things. Thar's a deal of evil that gits into print, an' if you ain't acquainted with yo' letters thar's less temptation to nose arter it. Reuben Merryweather would have his daughter Janet taught, though I urged strongly against it — holdin' that she could learn about sins an' immoralities even in Holy Writ. Who knows if she'd ever have gone wrong if she hadn't learned to read printed words?"

"Well, I'm glad print is too difficult for me," observed young Adam. "The pains I take to spell out the words would stand greatly in the way of my enj'yin' any immorality if I was to stumble across it. What part of Scripture, pa, is it that deals with sech doin's?"

"They crop up powerful thick in Kings, son, but I've found 'em when I looked sharp in Leviticus."

"If you are goin' to talk free, men, you can go to yo' own homes to do it," remarked Betsey, who was accustomed to appear at unexpected moments in order to impress them with the necessity of earning their supper. "This ain't no place for loose speakin'," she added, solemnly eyeing young Adam, who, having a weak memory, was striving to fix the names of Kings and Leviticus in his mind by repeating them slowly to himself.

"Axin' yo' pardon, Mrs. Bottom, we didn't know a lady was in hearin' or we'd never have made so bold," said old Adam. "Stop workin' yo' lips, son, an' hand Mrs. Bottom a cheer."

"What's all this talk anyway about Molly Merryweather an' Mr. Jonathan?" she demanded. "Abel, have you heard anything about it?"

The men glanced at each other with uneasy eyes, while they worked nervously at the shucking, for the question had been in the air from the moment of Abel's entrance, though none of them had been bold enough to speak it aloud. And now a woman, with characteristic feminine recklessness, had uttered the thought which had been revolving in each mind for ten minutes — yet nothing had happened!

Old Adam, pausing for the first time in his work, glanced with ungrudging respect at the short, lumpy figure in the black calico dress. Her face was still comely, and there was the mild mulishness in her expression that is seen in the countenances of many amiable yet obstinate persons.

"No, I haven't heard," replied Abel, and he added a moment later, "What do they say?"

"Well, Mr. Halloween had it from a man in Applegate who had it from a man in Petersburg who had it from a man in Richmond."

"Had what?"

"That Mr. Jonathan had been waitin' on her steady for some months, an' 'twas mo' likely than not to end in marriage. She's a good girl, is Molly. I ain't got no use for a woman that don't stand up for her sex in the face of men."

"True, true," admitted her hearers solemnly, one after another, for none among them had ever dared to defy the source of so many benefactions.

"Thar're some that thinks morals ain't meant for any but women," she pursued, "but I ain't one of 'em, as William Ming can testify, that holds to that view. Viciousness is viciousness whether it be male or female, and Mr. Mullen himself in the pulpit couldn't convince me that it don't take two to make an impropriety."

"True, true," they repeated, belying themselves under coercion in the accents of the chorus in a Greek drama. "'Tis true, ma'am, as you speak it."

"Thar were some mean enough to side against the po' innocent from the hour of her birth," she continued oracularly, while she looked severely at Solomon, who nodded in response, "an' these same folks have been preachin' over her an' pintin' at her ever sence she larned to crawl out of the cradle. But thar never was a kinder heart or a quicker hand in trouble than Molly's, an' if she did play fast and loose with the men, was it any worse, I'd like to know, than they deserve?"

"Thar's truth in what you say, ma'am, thar's a deal of truth in it," they agreed, nodding dejected craven heads over their pipes. Like all born politicians, their eye was for the main chance rather than for the argument, and they found it easier to forswear a conviction than to forego a comfort.

"Well, I'm roastin' a young possum along with the squirrel stew, so you'd better work up an appetite," she said in a mollified tone at the end of her lecture, as though she were desirous of infusing a more ardent spirit into them before her departure.

When the barn door closed behind her, a sigh of relief, half stifled through fear of detection, passed round the group.

"Thar goes a woman in a thousand," observed old Adam, edging nearer the bin.

"In a million — let's make it a million," urged Solomon Hatch.

"If they were all like that the world would be different, Mr. Doolittle," remarked Jim Halloween.

"Ah, yes, it would be different," agreed old Adam, and he sighed again.

"Thar'd be strict walkin' among us, I reckon," said his son.

"An' a chalk line the same as we draw for the sex," added Solomon Hatch.

"Sin would be scarce then an' life earnest," remarked William Ming, who had alluded to Betsey in the most distant terms ever since he had married her.

"We'd abide by the letter like the women, not by the spirit as we do," reflected Solomon.

They sighed for the third time more heavily, and the dried husks on the floor around the bin rattled as though a strong wind had entered.

"But she's one in a million, Mr. Doolittle," protested Solomon, after a pause, and his tone had grown cheerful.

"Yes, I reckon it's a million. Thar ain't mo' than one in a million of that rare sort," responded old Adam, falling to work with a zest.

"Was that ar young possum she spoke of the one yo' dawg Bess treed day befo' yesterday, William?" inquired Jim Halloween, whose hopes were centred upon the reward of his labours.

"Naw! that was an old un," replied William. "But thar never was a better possum dawg than that Bess of ours. I declar, she's got so much sense that she'll tree anything that grins at her, whether it's nigger or possum. Ain't that so, old gal?" he inquired of the spotted hound on a bed of husks at his side. "It wan't no longer than last week that she kept that little nigger of Uncle Boaz's up a persimmon tree for mo'n an hour."

"Thar's some niggers that look so much like possums when they git up in persimmon branches that it takes a sharp eye to tell the difference," observed Tim Mallory.

"Well, I'm partial to possum," remarked old Adam. "When all's said, thar ain't a better meat to the taste as long as it's plump an' juicy. Will you hand on that jug of cider, Tim? It's wonderful the way corn shuckin' manages to parch the throat an' whet the appetite."

The miller, who had declined Betsey's feast of possum, went out as soon as he had finished his pipe, and turned into the sunken road that led to Solomon Hatch's. In the little "best room," which was opened only for "courtings" or funerals, he found Judy seated under a dim lamp with a basket of darning in her lap.

"I was over at Mrs. Mullen's this morning," she explained, "an' she told me her eyesight was failing, so I offered to do her darnin'."

Slipping a small round gourd into the toe of a man's black sock, she examined it attentively, with her needle poised in the lamplight. Then bending her head slightly sideways, she surveyed her stitches from another angle, while she smoothed the darn with short caressing strokes over the gourd. He thought how capable and helpful she was, and from the cheerful energy with which she plied her needle, he judged that it gave her pleasure merely to be of use. What he did not suspect was that her wedding garments had been thrust aside as of less importance than Mrs. Mullen's basket of darning. She was just the girl for a farmer's wife, he told himself as he watched her — plain and sensible, the kind that would make a good mother and a good manager. And all the time a voice in the back of his brain was repeating distinctly. "They say it will end in a marriage — they say it will end in a marriage." But this voice seemed to come from a distance, and to have no connection either with his thoughts or with his life. It was independent of his will, and while it was speaking, he went on calmly thinking of Judy's children and of how well and properly she would bring them up.

"I went over again to look at the steer to-day," he said, after a moment. "There's a Jersey cow, too, I think of buying."

She nodded, pausing in her work, yet keeping her gaze fixed on the point of her needle. If he had looked at her darning, he would have seen that it was woven of exquisite and elaborate stitches — such stitches as went into ecclesiastical embroideries in the Middle Ages.

"They're the best kind for butter," she observed, and carefully ran her needle crosswise in and out of the threads.

Conversation was always desultory between them, and when it flagged, as it did now, they could sit for hours in the composed and unembarrassed silence of persons who meet upon the firm basis of mutual assistance in practical matters. Their relation was founded upon the simple law of racial continuance, which is as indifferent to the individual as it is to the abstract apotheosis of passion.

"I'm going to Applegate to-morrow to order a new mill-stone," he said at last, when he rose. "Is there anything you would like me to get for you?"

She reflected a moment. "I need a quarter of a yard of braid to finish the green dress I am making. Could you match it?"

"I'll try if you'll give me a sample."

Laying her work aside for the first time, she hunted amid a number of coloured spools in her basket, and brought to light a bit of silver braid, which she handed to him.

"Was Mr. Mullen at your house to-day, Abel?" she asked suddenly, turning her face from the lamp.

"Yes, he comes to see Blossom now, but she doesn't appear to care for him. I thought she did once, didn't you?"

"Yes, I thought she did, but that was when he was in love with Molly, wasn't it?"

For an instant he gazed at the bit of braid, as though his soul were intent upon unravelling the intricate pattern.

"I wonder whether it is that we get a thing when we stop wanting it or that we merely stop wanting it when we get it?" he demanded passionately of fate.

But Judy had no mind for dubious philosophies. The thing she wanted she knew she should never get and she knew as well that, in all likelihood, she should never stop wanting it. Only a passionate soul in a commonplace body could have squandered itself with such superb prodigality.

"I don't know," she answered wearily, "I've never noticed much either what people get or what they want."

"Well, Blossom wanted Mr. Mullen once and now he wants Blossom. I wish mother didn't have so poor an opinion of him."

She flushed and looked up quickly, for in her heart she felt that she hated Sarah Revercomb. A disgust for her coming marriage swept over her. Then she told herself stubbornly that everybody married sooner or later, and that anyway her stepmother would never forgive her if she broke off with Abel.

"She doesn't even go to his church. I don't see what right she has to find fault with him," she said.

"That's her way, you know. You can't make her over. She pretends he doesn't know his Scripture, and when he comes to see Blossom, she asks him all sorts of ridiculous questions just to embarrass him. Yesterday she told him she couldn't call to mind the difference in cubits between the length and the breadth of Solomon's temple, and would he please save her the trouble of going to the Bible to find out?"

"Does she want him to stop coming?" inquired Judy, breathlessly.

"I don't know what she wants, but I wish Blossom would marry him, don't you?"

"Don't I?" she repeated, and her basket of spools fell to the floor, where they scattered on the square rag carpet of log-cabin pattern. As they were gathering them up, their heads touched by accident, and he kissed her gravely. For a moment she thought, while she gazed into his brilliant eyes, "Abel is really very handsome, after all." Then folding her work carefully, she stuck her needle through the darn and placed the basket on a shelf between a Bible with gilt clasps and a wreath of pressed flowers under a glass case. "He couldn't have got anybody to fill in those holes better," she said to herself, and the reflection was not without a balm for her aching heart.

At dawn next morning Abel passed again, driving in the direction of the Applegate road. The day was breaking clear and still, and over the autumnal pageantry in the abandoned fields, innumerable silver cobwebs shone iridescent in the sunrise. Squirrels were already awake, busily harvesting, and here and there a rabbit bobbed up from beneath a shelter of sassafras. Overhead the leaves on a giant chestnut tree hung as heavily as though they were cut out of copper, and beyond a sharp twist in the corduroy road, a branch of sweet gum curved like a bent flame on the edge of the twilight dimness of the forest. The scarlet of the leaves reminded him of the colour of Molly's jacket, and immediately the voice somewhere in his brain repeated, "They say it will end in a marriage." The words awoke in him a violent and unreasonable resentment. He could think of his own marriage quite calmly, as something that did not bear directly upon his ideal of Molly; but the conception of her as Gay's wife, struck a blow at the image he had enskied and then schooled himself into worshipping from a distance. He was willing to relinquish her as too fair and flitting for mortal embraces, but the thought that another man should possess that elusive loveliness was like the thrust of hot iron into his wound. That Molly loved Gay he could not believe. That she was willing to marry him without loving him, was a suggestion which appeared to him little short of an insult. True, he did not love Judy to whom he was to be married to-morrow, but that was a case so entirely and utterly different that there could be no comparison! He was doing it because he was sorry for Judy and it was the only way he could help her. Besides, had not Molly urged such a step upon him repeatedly as the fulfilment of his obvious destiny?

The reasons were all there. He had them labelled and assorted in his mind, ready for instant reference should they be required. Sleepless nights had gone to the preparation of them, and yet — and yet — in his heart he knew, beyond contradiction, that he was wedding Judy because his pity had once made a fool of him. He had acted from the loftiest motives when he had asked her to marry him, and twenty-four hours later he would have given ten years of his life to have been able to eliminate those lofty motives from his character. To go back on her was, of course, out of the question. In the history of Old Church no man — with the exception of two drunkards and old Mr. Jonathan Gay — had ever gone back on a woman. With girls it was different, since they, being sentimentally above the proneness to error as well as practically below the liability for maintenance, might play fast and loose wherever their fleeting fancy alighted. But in the case of his unhappy sex, an honourable inclination once yielded to, was established forever. His sacrifice was sanctioned by custom. There was no escape since it was tradition that held him by the throat.

His business in Applegate, which included a careful matching of Judy's braid, took up the entire morning; and it was dinner time before he turned back to the little inn, known as Raleigh's Tavern, at which the farmers usually stopped for meals. Here, after washing his hands in a basin on the back porch, he hastily smoothed his hair, and passed into the small paved court in front of the tavern. As he approached the doorway, the figure of a young woman in a black dress, which he felt instinctively did not "belong" to Applegate, came down the short steps, and paused an instant to caress a large dog that was lying in the sunshine near the entrance. The next minute, while he fell back, hat in hand, behind a pile of boxes in the yard, he heard his name called in a familiar voice, and lifting his eyes found himself face to face with Molly.

"Abel, aren't you going to speak to me?" she asked, and moving a step toward him, held out both hands with an impulsive gesture.

As his hand met hers, he withdrew it quickly as though he were stung by the touch of her soft fingers. Every nerve in his body leaped suddenly to life, and the moment was so vivid while he faced her, that he felt half convinced that all the long months since their parting had dissolved in shadows. The borderline between the dream and the actuality was obliterated. It seemed to him not only impossible, but absurd that he should ever have believed himself engaged to Judy Hatch — that he should be going to marry her to-morrow! All that side of his life had no closer relation to his real self than it had to the self of old Adam Doolittle. While he had planned it he had been a corpse not a living man, but at the sound of Molly's voice, at the clasp of her fingers, at the touching, expectant brightness in her eyes, the resurrection had happened. Judy was a corpse preparing to wed a corpse that had become alive — and the mating of death with life was abhorrent to him in his illumination.

"We are on our way to Richmond," explained Molly, very gently, "and we are waiting to change trains. Oh, Abel, I have wanted so much to see you!"

It was the old Molly, in truth — Molly in her softest, in her most dangerous, in her divinest mood. While he gazed at her he could make no answer because an emotion that was half self-reproach, half furious longing, choked back his words, and had he opened his lips it would have been to utter some foolish inarticulate arraignment of destiny. In the confusion of his senses he did not notice that she had altered, but the next day he remembered that her face looked smaller and more delicate, like a tinted egg-shell he had once seen, and that her eyes in consequence were wondrously, were almost startlingly, large. All that he was conscious of when he turned and rushed from her after that one look, was that the old agony of his loss had resurged afresh in his heart.

CHAPTER IV

HIS DAY OF FREEDOM

He crossed the courtyard, and turned mechanically into a street which led in the opposite direction from the road to Old Church. A crowd of men, gathered in the doorway of the post-office, called to him to join them, and he answered in a voice that sounded remote and cheerful in his own ears.

"If you want to whip the bosses in these parts there's the man for you," he heard one of them remark, and knew that they were discussing his political chances. Quickening his steps, he walked rapidly to the end of the street, passed the scattered negro hovels, surrounded by blighted sunflowers, and turned into a road which ran between fields of dusty stubble into a stretch of brown and desolate country.

Suddenly, as though a screw had loosened in his brain, he felt his passion slip the control of his will and beat down, one by one, the orderly procession of reasons that had risen against it. A sense of exhilaration, of joy so fierce that it was akin to pain, took possession of him. "I won't go back!" he said defiantly, "I won't go back!" And with the words his longing for Molly was swallowed up in the tumultuous consciousness of his release. It was as if he had burst his bonds by a single effort of strength, and was stretching his cramped limbs in the open. The idea of escape from captivity was so strong, that he looked neither to right nor to left of him, but kept his gaze fixed on the road straight ahead, as a man does who saves his energy for the final break from his pursuers. At the moment he would have bartered his soul in exchange for the unholy, the nameless rapture of the vagabond and the gipsy, of all the neglected and the despised of civilization. Duty, love, ambition — all these were as nothing beside the perfect, the incommunicable passion of the open road!

It is a mood that comes once to every man — to some men more frequently — a mood in which the prehistoric memory of the soul is stirred, and an intolerable longing arises for the ancient nomadic freedom of the race; when the senses surfeited by civilization cry out for the strong meat of the jungle — for the scent of the raw, dark earth and for the gleam of the yellow moonlight on the wet, rustling leaves. This longing may come but once in adolescence, or many times until the frost of age has withered the senses. It may come amid the showery warmth and the roving fragrance of an April day, or beside the shining, brown, leaf-strewn brooks of November. But let it come to a man when it will, and that man renounces, in spite of himself, his little leaden gods of prosperity, and in his heart, beneath the woven garment of custom, he exchanges his birthright of respectability for a mess of Romany pottage. Under the luminous sweep and rush of this vision, Abel laughed suddenly at the thought of his marriage to Judy. Obstacles which had appeared insurmountable at sunrise, showed now as unsubstantial and evanescent as shadows.

"I won't go back!" he repeated exultantly, "I won't go back!"

"You're talkin' to yo'self, mister," said a voice at his side, and looking down he saw a small barefooted boy, in overalls, with a bag of striped purple calico hanging from one shoulder.

"You've been talkin' to yo'self all along the road," the boy repeated with zest.

"Have I? What are you up to?"

"I've been chinquapinin'. Ma, she thinks I'm at school, but I ain't." He looked up wickedly, bubbling over with the shameless joys of truancy. "Thar's a lot of chinquapin bushes over yonder in Cobblestone's wood an' they're chock full of nuts."

"And they're in your bag now, I suppose?"

"I've got a peck of 'em, an' I'm goin' to make me a chain as long as — that. It'll be a watch chain, an' I've made a watch out of a walnut. It can't keep time, of course," he added, "'cep'n for that it's really a sho' nough watch." His small freckled face, overhung by a mat of carroty hair, was wreathed in a contagious, an intoxicating smile — the smile of one who has bought happiness at the price of duty, and whose enjoyment is sweetened by the secret knowledge that he has successfully eluded the Stern Daughter of the Voice of God. Instinctively, Abel was aware that the savour was not in the chinquapins, but in the disobedience, and his heart warmed to the boy with the freckled face.

"Are you going home now?" he asked.

"You bet I ain't. I've got my snack ma fixed for me." He unrolled a brown paper package and revealed two thick slices of bread with a fishing hook stuck in one corner. "Thar's apple-butter between 'em," he added, rolling his tongue, and a minute later, "Ma'd whip me jest the same, an' I'd ruther be whipped for a whole day than for a half. Besides," he burst out as though the mental image convulsed him with delight, "if I went home I'd have to help her tote the water for the washin'."

"But what are you going to do with yourself?"

"I'm goin' huntin' with a gravel-shooter, an' I'm goin' fishin' with a willow pole, an' I'm goin' to find all the old hare traps, an' I'm goin' to see 'em make hog's meat over at Bryarly's, an' I'm goin' to the cider pressin' down here at Cobblestone's. She ain't goin' to ketch me till I've had my day!" he concluded with a whoop of ecstasy. Startled by the sound, a rabbit sprang up from a clump of sassafras, and the boy was over the fence, on a rush of happy bare feet, in pursuit of it.

The road curved abruptly into a short wood, filled with dwarfed holly trees, which were sown thickly with a shower of scarlet berries — and while Abel walked through it, his visions thronged beside him like the painted and artificial troupe of a carnival. He saw Molly coming to him, separating him from Judy, surrendering her warm flesh and blood to his arms. "I won't go back!" he said, still defiantly, "I'll love Molly if I pay for it to the last day I live." With a terrible exultation he felt that he was willing to pay for it — to pay any price, even the price of his honour. His passion rushed like a flame through his blood, scorching, blackening, devouring.

Beyond the wood, the winding ash-coloured road dipped into a hollow, and when he reached the brow of the low hill ahead, a west wind, which had risen suddenly from the river, caught up with his footsteps and raced on like a wild thing at his side. He could hear it sighing plaintively in the bared trees he had left, or driving the hurtled leaves like a flock of frightened partridges over the sumach and sassafras, and then lashing itself into a frenzy as it chased over a level of broomsedge. Always it sang of freedom — of the savage desire and thirst for freedom — of the ineffable, the supreme ecstasy of freedom! And always while he listened to it, while he felt the dead leaves stinging his flesh, he told himself passionately that he "would not go back — that he would not marry to-morrow!"

For hours he stalked with the wind. Then, turning out of the road, he flung himself down on the broomsedge and lay for other hours gazing over the autumn landscape to the softly luminous band on the far horizon. Somewhere in a darkened corner of his brain there was the resolve that he would not return until, like the freckled faced, barefooted boy, he had "had his day."

At nine o'clock that night he entered an inn in the town of Briarwood, twenty miles north of Applegate, and sitting down at one of the tables, ordered something to eat. His limbs ached, not from the walk in the wind, but from the passion that had whipped his body like a destroying fire. He felt still the burning throb of the sore that it had left. Apart from this dull agony he could feel nothing — he could desire nothing — he could remember nothing. Everything was over except the instinct that told him that he was empty and must be fed.

While he sat there, with his aching forehead bowed in his hands, there came a light touch on his shoulder, and looking up he saw the Reverend Orlando Mullen, standing at his side like an embodiment of all the things from which he had fled. For an instant he could only stare blindly back at him. Then something which had opened in his soul, closed softly, as if it were a shell of custom, and he knew that he was again a prisoner. With the sight of that conventional figure, the scattered instincts of habit and of respectability—of all the qualities for which the race stood and against which the individual had rebelled — all these rallied anew to the battlefield from which they had been routed by his insurgent emotions.

"I suppose you're waiting, like myself, Mr. Revercomb, for the nine-forty-five train?"

"Yes, I'm waiting for the train."

"Business brought you so far away?"

"Yes, business brought me." Lifting his glass of beer, he drained it slowly under Mr. Mullen's friendly and curious eyes.

"It looks as if we should have a perfect day for the wedding," remarked the rector, after a pause. "Like you, I was called off on an urgent matter, but, fortunately, it only means losing a little sleep."

Then the whistle of the train blew, and ten minutes later, Abel followed the young clergyman into the single coach and sat down in a vacant seat at his side.

It was two o'clock when at last he drove into the back gate at the mill, and unhitching his mare, turned her out into the pasture. As he crossed the road to the house, he lifted his eyes mechanically to the sky, and saw that the stars shone soft and near as if they were watching over a night of love.

CHAPTER V

THE SHAPING OF MOLLY

LEANING back in the uncomfortable plush-covered chair in the train to Richmond, Molly watched the flat landscape glide past, while she thought a little wistfully of the morning she had made this same trip dressed in one of Mrs. Gay's gowns. On her knees Mrs. Gay's canary, extinguished beneath the black silk cover to his cage, uttered from time to time a feeble pipe of inquiry, and on the rack above her head Mrs. Gay's tea basket rattled loudly in a sudden lurch of the train. Since the hour in which she had left the overseer's cottage and moved into the "big house" at Jordan's Journey, the appealing little lady had been the dominant influence in her life — an influence so soft and yet so overpowering that she had at times a sensation of being smothered in scented swansdown. For several months after leaving Old Church her education had absorbed her energies, and she had found time merely to gasp occasionally in the oppressive sweetness of the atmosphere which Mrs. Gay's personality diffused. Everything was strange then, and her desire for strangeness, for unfamiliar impressions, had amounted to a passion. She had been very anxious, too, very much afraid lest she should make a mistake. When she had entered the hotel dining-room in New York she had felt as if she were walking on ploughed ground, and the red velvet carpet had seemed to rise and sink under her feet. That first night had been exquisite torture to her, and so, she surmised through some intuitive understanding, had it been to Kesiah. For weeks after that time of embarrassment, she had watched herself carefully — watched every instant — and in the end she had triumphed. With her growing ease, her old impulsiveness had returned to her, and with the wonderful adaptability of the Southern woman, she had soon ceased to feel a sense of discomfort in her changed surroundings. The instinct of class she had never had, and this lack of social reverence had helped her not a little in her ascent of the ladder. It is difficult to suffer from a distinction which one does not admit — and her perfect unconsciousness of inferiority to Mrs. Gay had placed her, without her being aware of it, in the position of an equal.

With her hands clasped on the cage of the canary, she gazed thoughtfully at Kesiah, who was sitting a little in front of her, with her eyeglasses on her nose and the daily paper opened before her. Gay was to meet them in Richmond, and as Molly remembered this now, she realized that her feeling about their meeting had changed during the last few hours. She liked Gay — she responded to his physical charm, to that indefinable air of adventure which hangs sometimes about men who have lived hard without wasting their surplus vitality — but in spite of the strong attraction he possessed for her, she knew that in her heart she had never thoroughly believed in him. Unconsciously to herself she had measured his stature by Abel's, and he had come short of her standard.

"Molly," asked Mrs. Gay, turning her head suddenly, "did you write Jonathan to expect us by this train?"

"Yes, Aunt Angela, he knows we are coming. Shall I lower the shade? Is the sunlight too strong for you?"

"No, thank you, dear. Where is Dicky?"

"I have him here on my knees. Does your head ache?"

"A little," murmured Mrs. Gay in a tone of resigned sweetness, and the conversation was over.

At the sound of Molly's voice an old lady, travelling South with a trained nurse, turned in her chair, and looked at the girl as she might have looked at a fruit for which she longed, but which she had been forbidden to touch. Her face, under an elaborate bonnet trimmed with artificial purple wistaria, was withered and crossed with lines, and her poor old hands were so knotted from gout that she could hardly lift the tea-cup from the small table which had been fastened in front of her. Yet for one instant, as she gazed on Molly's girlish freshness, her youth stirred feebly somewhere in the dregs of her memory, and her eyes grew deprecating and piteous, as though her soul were saying, "I know I have missed it, but it isn't my fault ——"

The tea-cup trembled in her hand, and her old lips fumbled pathetically for her bit of toast, while across from her, with only the narrow aisle of the car between, youth incarnate sat weaving its separate dream of a universe.

"Yes, two hours earlier," ran Molly's thoughts, "I looked forward to the meeting with Jonathan, and now, in so short a time, I have grown almost to dread it." She tried to think of his pleasant, well-coloured face, of his whimsical, caressing smile, but in the niche where his image should have stood, she saw Abel in his country clothes, with his red-brown throat rising out of his blue shirt and his brilliant eyes under the dark hair on his forehead. Then suddenly memory played her a ridiculous trick, for she remembered that his hair grew in a close clipped circular wave, like the hair which has been bound by a fillet on the head of a child.

"I wonder why he wouldn't speak to me?" she thought, with a pang. "I wonder if he has really got over caring?" She had always thought of Abel as a possession more absolutely her own than even Mr. Jonathan's provision. When she had said so passionately that she wanted to be free, she had not meant that at any minute she chose, Abel would not be ready and willing to fly back into bondage. That Abel, after all these years, should actually have ceased to care for her — should have refused even to speak to her! It was absurd — it was vindictive — it was unchristian! She had half a mind to get Mr. Mullen to talk to him. Then her heart throbbed when she remembered the touch of his hand, the look in his eyes, the thirst of his lips seeking hers. That was only six months ago — such a very little while — and now he had rushed away from the sight of her! She thought of their parting, when she had said that she wanted to see the world, and he had offered at once to release her. Since then she had seen the world until she was tired of it. At times she had been terribly homesick for Old Church, and she had never been happy except when Gay had taken her to see pictures or into wonderful parks. Always the thought had lain hidden in her mind that some day, when she could stand it no longer, she would go back and wear her red jacket and run free in the fields with Abel again. Her very selfishness had seemed natural to her because Abel had always been there, like the air and the sky and the broomsedge; he was a part of the scene, and she found it impossible to detach him from his surroundings.

At the station in Richmond, Gay met them, and for the first few minutes his mother absorbed his attention. Molly had not seen him for six weeks, and she noticed that he had grown fleshier and that this lent an additional heaviness to his shaven chin. Even his charming smile could not disguise the slight coarseness of feature, with which he was beginning already to pay for his pleasures. By the time he was forty, he would be quite stout and "lumpy," she thought.

There was much excitement about collecting Mrs. Gay's packages, and the drive to the hotel was filled with anxious inquiries from Kesiah, who was always nervous and fussy when she travelled.

"Molly, did you see my umbrella put in?"

"Yes, Aunt Kesiah, it is here in the corner by Jonathan."

"I forgot to notice Angela's medicine case. Did you see that it wasn't overlooked?"

"Yes, Patsey has it."

Then came a solicitous exhibition of filial affection on the part of Gay, and at last, to Molly's relief, they arrived at the new, brilliantly lighted hotel, and were led through stifling corridors, carpeted in red, to their rooms on the second floor in the front of the building. As she passed over the velvet carpets, Molly had again the sensation that she was walking over ploughed ground; and when she had escaped from Mrs. Gay's sitting-room, on the pretext of dressing for dinner, she threw open the window, and leaned out of the close atmosphere into the freshness of the November evening. This was what she had once looked upon as pleasure — or at least as exciting amusement — to move continually from one hot and overfurnished hotel to another, to fuss about missing packages, to see crowds of strange faces passing before her, all fat and overfed and all, somehow, looking exactly alike.

A wave of homesickness for the white roads and the golden broomsedge of Old Church swept over her. She wanted the open fields, and more than all, far more than all, she wanted Abel! It was her fault — she had made her choice — no one else was to blame for it. And, then, though she had made her choice and no one else was to blame for it, she felt that she almost hated old Mr. Jonathan, as she still called him in her thoughts, because he had left her his money. At the bottom of her heart, there was the perfectly unreasonable suspicion that he had arranged the whole thing out of spite.

In the sitting-room, meanwhile, which Kesiah's bedroom separated from Molly's, Mrs. Gay was lying on a couch beside a table on which stood a cut-glass bowl of purple orchids sent to her by her son. She was looking a little pale, but this pallor was not unbecoming since it enhanced the expression of appealing melancholy in her eyes. To look at her was to recognize that life had crushed her, and yet that her soul exhaled an intenser sweetness in the midst of its suffering.

Jonathan had just gone down to buy the evening papers; in the next room she could hear Kesiah at the unpacking; so she was left for a moment alone with her imagination. The fatigue of the trip had affected her nerves, and she sank, while she lay there in her travelling gown, which she had not yet removed, into one of those spells of spiritual discontent which followed inevitably any unusual physical discomfort. She thought, not resentfully but sadly, that Kesiah managed to grow even more obstinate with years, that Jonathan must have tired of her or he would never have forgotten the list of medicines she had sent him, that Molly took Kesiah away from the sick-room entirely too often. From these reflections she drifted naturally into an emotion of self pity, and the thought occurred to her, as it did invariably in such hours of depression, that her world had never been large enough for the full exercise and appreciation of her highest qualities. If she had only lived in a richer century amid more congenial surroundings! Who could tell what her usefulness might have been had not destiny continually thwarted her aspirations? Before the idea of this thwarted usefulness, which was always vaguely associated with the moral regeneration of distinguished historic sinners of the opposite sex, like Lord Byron or Alfred de Musset, she began to feel that she had been not only neglected, but wasted in the atmosphere in which she had been placed.

Jonathan's entrance, with the evening papers in his hand, broke the thread of her reverie, and as he sat down in a chair by her side, she wondered if he had inherited her "nature" and if he, also, cherished in his soul the same spiritual yearnings? Her wonder was, however, entirely unnecessary, for Jonathan had very little imagination, and would never have wasted his time yearning over a sinner whom he had never seen.

"I stopped a minute to get into my evening clothes," he said, in the cheerful voice of one who is a stranger to aspirations of soul. "I thought Molly would be dressed by this time. She is usually so quick."

"Yes, she is usually very quick," replied Mrs. Gay gently, while she gathered all the forces of her character, which were slightly disorganized by her recent indulgence in pensive musings, to do battle against an idea which she had striven repeatedly of late to banish from her thoughts. "I wish, dear Jonathan," she added, "that you would speak a few words to Molly. You have such influence with her, and I am sure I don't wonder."

"I'll speak them with pleasure, mother. Just drop me a hint as to what they are to be about."

"She's a sweet, unselfish girl, we all know that, but there are times, dear, especially when strangers are present, when she appears a little — well, a little crude — you know what I mean?"

"I fancy I know, but I don't see just what we are to do about it. You might as well attempt to reshape Molly's nose as her character. Let's admit that both might be improved and then give up the job. She's got charm — there's no doubt of that. I believe even if she were plain she'd be almost as attractive. Why, I've seen her when she was very nearly plain sometimes, and she hasn't been a whit less fascinating than when she's looking her prettiest. It's the infinite variety and all that, you know. Her soul does it, I suppose."

"Yes, she must have charm," replied Mrs. Gay, ignoring what he had said about "soul" because she felt a vague dislike to hearing a word applied indiscriminately to others which had become, as it were, associated with herself. "I can't analyze it, however, for she hasn't a single really perfect feature except her eyes."

"But such eyes! In the sunlight they are nearer the colour of a humming-bird's wing than anything I know of."

"I suppose they are rather unusual, but, after all a fine pair of eyes can't make exactly a — well, a lady, Jonathan."

"The deuce!" he ejaculated, and then added quickly, "What has she done now, mother?"

One of Mrs. Gay's first principles of diplomacy was that an unpleasant fact treated as non-existent, was deprived in a measure of its power for evil. By the application of this principle, she had extinguished her brother-in-law's passion for Janet Merryweather, and she hoped that it would prove equally effective in blighting her son's incipient fancy for Molly. She looked upon Jonathan's infatuation as a mere sinister shadow as yet, but she was shrewd enough to suspect that the shadow would be converted into substance at the first hint of her recognition that it was impending. Indirect influence alone remained to her, and she surmised that her ultimate triumph would depend upon the perfection of her indirectness. When it came to the game of strategy, Jonathan, being of an open nature, was no match for his mother. He was inclined by temperament to accept things at their face value — particularly women — and not to worry about them unless they interfered with his appetite. When he lost his desire for his meals, then he began, somewhat to his surprise, to consider them seriously.

"Of course I feel just as you do about it," remarked Mrs. Gay, after a weighty silence. "I'm fond of her and I see her good points — but there's something about her — I suppose it's the strain of Merryweather blood, or the fact of her being born in such unfortunate circumstances —" Her manner grew severer. "But — whatever the cause, it shows itself in a kind of social defiance that would always keep her from being just — oh, well, you know ——"

"She's bright enough, mother, she's quick enough, and she's pretty enough, isn't she?"

"She would be, Jonathan, if her defiance did not come from pure wilfulness. But she says and does the most unconventional things simply for the pleasure of shocking people. It isn't that she doesn't know, it's that she doesn't care."

"But she'll get to care — all women do, if you give them time." His tone implied that the whole sex was comprised in an elementary branch of psychology which he had mastered with the help of a few simple rules of analogy.

"Well, she may, dear, but I doubt it. She is as absolutely without class instinct as an anarchist, I believe. When she lived in the overseer's cottage she never looked up and now that she has come out of it, she never looks down. We've told her repeatedly that she mustn't talk to strangers about that part of her life, but it isn't the least bit of use. Only a few days ago I heard her telling Judge Grayson that nobody appeared to do any 'courting' in New York."

To her amazement he burst into a laugh.

"By Jove, I suppose she misses it," he returned, "but what about that fellow she picked up in the North who hung around her last summer?"

"Oh, there have been plenty of them hanging about her. Molly is the kind, you know, that will have lovers wherever you put her." There was a faint condescension in her voice, for she herself preferred adorers to lovers.

"But she hasn't seemed to care about them," he said. "I believe she has grown tired of flirting."

"I'm sure she doesn't flirt with them, and I think it's all because she is pining for somebody she left at Old Church — the miller or the rector or somebody we've never even heard of."

"What's that?" he started a little, and she saw at once that, although she had used her most delicate weapon, he had flinched from the first touch of the blade. "I'm positive she hadn't a real fancy for anybody down there," he added, as he relapsed into his attitude of indifference.

"I know she says so, Jonathan, but there are other ways of telling."

"Oh, there's no truth in that — it's all nonsense," he said irritably.

Then a door creaked in the hall, there was a rustle of silken skirts on the carpet, and Molly, having dried her tears, came in, pliant, blushing, and eager to please them both.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH HEARTS GO ASTRAY

SHE was enchantingly pretty, there was no doubt of that, thought Gay as he watched her at dinner. He had rarely seen a face so radiant in expression, and she had lost, he noticed, the touch of provincialism in her voice and manner. To-night, for the first time, he felt that there was a fawn-like shyness about her, as if her soul had flown startled before his approach. Of her meeting with Abel in Applegate he knew nothing, and while he discerned instinctively the softness and the richness of her mood, it was but reasonable that he should attribute it to a different and, as it happened, to a mistaken cause. He liked that faint shadow of her lashes on her vivid cheeks, and while he drank his coffee and cracked his nuts, he told himself, half humorously, that the ideal love, after all, was a perpetual virgin in perpetual flight. As he rose from the table, he remembered Blossom, and the pile of her half-read letters in his travelling bag. "She's a dear good girl, and just because I've got myself into a mess, I've no idea of behaving like a cad to her," he thought.

That was downstairs in the hotel dining-room, and an hour later, when he faced Molly alone in the little sitting-room, he repeated the phrase to himself with an additional emphasis — for when the woman before him in flesh and blood looked up at him with entreating eyes, like a child begging a favour, the woman in his memory faded quickly into remoteness.

"What's the matter, little girl?" he asked.

"Oh, Jonathan, I must go back to Old Church — to-morrow!" she said.

"Why in thunder do you want to do that?"

"There's something I must see about. I can't wait. I never can wait when I want anything."

"So I have observed. This something is so important, by the way, that you haven't thought of it for six months?"

"Well, I've thought of it — sometimes," she admitted.

"Can't you tell me what it is, Molly?"

She shook her head. Her face was pink and her eyes shone; whatever it was, it had obviously enriched her beauty.

"Tell me, little girl," he repeated and leaned closer. There had always been something comfortable and warm in his nearness to her, and under the influence of it, she felt tempted to cry out, "I want to go back to find out if Abel still loves me! I am an idiot, I know, but I feel that I shall die if I discover that he has got over caring. This suspense is more than I can bear, yet I never knew until I felt it, how much he means to me."

This was what she wanted to say, but instead of uttering it, she merely murmured:

"I can't, Jonathan, you would never understand." Her whole being was vibrant to-night with the desire for love, yet, in spite of his wide experience with the passion, she knew that he would not comprehend what she meant by the word. It wasn't his kind of love in the least that she wanted; it differed from his as the light of the sun differs from the blaze of a prairie fire. "It's just a feeling," she added, helplessly. "You don't have feelings, I suppose?"

"Don't I?" he echoed. "Oh, Molly, if you only knew how many!"

"But they don't bother you — they don't keep you awake at night?"

"While they last — but they don't last, you know, they have their seasons. That's the curse of them, or the charm. If they only lasted earth would be paradise or hell, wouldn't it?"

But generalizations had no further attraction for her. Her mind was one great wonder, and she felt that she could hardly keep alive until she could stand face to face with Abel and read the truth in his eyes.

"All the same I want to go," she repeated obstinately.

Suspicion seized him, and his mouth grew a little hard under his short moustache.

"Molly," he asked, "have you been thinking again about the miller?"

"How absurd! What put that into your head?" she retorted indignantly.

The idea, innocent as it was, appeared to incense her. What a little firebrand she looked, and how hot her eyes glowed when she was angry!

"Well, I'm glad you haven't — because, you know, really it wouldn't do," he answered.

"What wouldn't do?"

"Your marrying a Revercomb — it wouldn't do in the least."

"Why wouldn't it?"

"You can see that for yourself, can't you? You've come entirely out of that life and you couldn't go back to it."

"I don't see why I couldn't if I wanted to?" she threw out at him with sudden violence.

Clearly, as his mother had said, she was lacking in reverence, yet he couldn't agree that she would never become exactly a lady. Not with that high-bred poise of the head and those small, exquisite hands!

"Well, in the first place, I don't believe you'd ever want to," he said calmly, "and in the second place, if you ever did such a thing, my little weather-vane, you'd regret it in ten minutes."

"If I did it, I don't believe I'd ever regret it," was her amazing rejoinder.

Stupefied yet dauntless, he returned to the charge.

"You're talking sheer nonsense, you silly girl, and you know it," he said. "If you were to go back to Old Church to marry the miller, you'd be sorry before you got up to the altar."

"I'm not going back there to marry him," she persisted stubbornly, "but I don't believe if I were to do it, I'd ever regret it.

"You think you'd be satisfied to give up ten thousand dollars a year and settle down to raising chickens for a living?"

"I like raising chickens."

"And you'd expect that pursuit to make up to you for all you would sacrifice — for the world and people and freedom to go and come as you please?"

"I don't care about the world," she replied, sticking, he told himself, as obstinately as a mule to her point, "and people seem to me just the same everywhere."

"The same?" he repeated, "do you actually mean that you can't see any difference?"

"No difference that matters. It's all in the clothes and the sillier things they talk about. Why, I'd rather hear old Adam Doolittle talk than that stupid Judge Grayson, who dined with us the other night, and never mentioned anything but stocks. If I've got to hear about a single subject I'd rather it would be crops than stocks — they seem more human, somehow."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, under his breath, "what's got into you to-night, Molly? I honestly believe you've begun to idealize the miller now you've been so long away from him. He's a handsome fellow; you don't see his physical match in a day, I'm willing to admit, but if you went back again you'd be surprised to find how — well, how rustic he would appear to you."

The colour rushed to her face, and her eyes burned hot under the sudden droop of her lashes.

"He's better than any one I've seen anywhere," she replied, "he's bigger, he's stronger, he's kinder. I'm not good enough to marry him, and I know it."

For an instant he looked at her in the pained surprise of one who had never indulged in verbal excesses. Then he said, coldly; "So you're working yourself into a sentiment over young Revercomb. My dear child, if you only knew how unspeakably silly it is. Nothing could be more absurd than to throw away an income of ten thousand dollars a year in order to marry a poor man." The idea of her committing such folly was intensely distressing to him. His judgment was now in the ascendant, and like most men, while under the cool and firm control of the rational part of his nature, he was incapable of recalling with any sympathy the times when he had followed the lead of those qualities which rise superior to reason.

"I don't care how poor he is," said Molly passionately, for her rational part was plainly not in the ascendant. "Nobody ever thought about his being so poor until your uncle left me all that horrid money. He was honestly born and I wasn't, yet he didn't care. He was big and splendid and I was little and mean, that was the matter!"

"By George, you're in love with him!" he exclaimed, and beneath the coldness of his manner, his heart suffered an incomprehensible pang. Undoubtedly he had permitted himself to drift into a feeling for Molly, which, had he been wise, he would have strangled speedily in the beginning. The obstacles which had appeared to make for his safety, had, he realized now, merely afforded shelter to the flame until it had grown strong enough to overleap them. While he stood there, with his angry gaze on her flushing and paling beauty, he had the helpless sensation of a man who returns at sunrise to find a forest fire raging where he had left a few sticks smouldering at midnight.

"I'm not in love with anybody — you've no right to say so," she returned, "but I'll not have him abused. It's not true, it's not just, it's not generous."

This was too much for his forbearance, though he told himself that, after all, there was no "getting at" Molly from the surface, and that this outburst might conceal a fancy for himself quite as well as for the miller. The last idea, while it tantalized him, was not without a pleasant sting for his senses.

"You're a goose, Molly, and I've half a mind to shake you soundly," he said. "Since there's no other way to cure you of this foolish infatuation, I'll take you down to Old Church to-morrow and let you see with your own eyes. You've forgotten how things look there, that's my opinion."

"Oh, Jonathan," she said, and grew dangerously sweet, while all her soft flushing body leaned toward him. "You are a perfect dear, aren't you?"

"I rather think I am, since you put the question. Molly, will you kiss me?"

She drew back at once, a little deprecating, because she was honestly sorry, since he was so silly as to want to kiss her, that she couldn't oblige him. For her own part, she felt, she wouldn't have cared, but she remembered Abel's anger because of the kiss by the brook, and the thought hardened her heart. It was foolish of men to make so much importance of kisses.

"I'm sorry, but I can't. Don't ask me, Jonathan — all the same you are a darling!"

Then before he could detain her, she had slipped away from him through Kesiah's door, which she closed after her.

"Aunt Kesiah," he heard her exclaim joyously, "Jonathan is going to take me to Old Church to spend to-morrow!"

Kesiah, in an ugly grey dressing-gown, tied at the waist with a black cord, was drying Mrs. Gay's sheets before the radiator. At Molly's entrance, she turned, and said warningly, "Patsey is rubbing Angela after her bath. What was that about Old Church, dear?"

"Jonathan has promised to take me down there to-morrow."

"To spend the day? Well, I suppose we may trust you with him." From her manner one might have inferred that the idea of not trusting anybody with Jonathan would have been a joke.

She went on calmly shaking out Mrs. Gay's sheets before the radiator, as if the conversation were over, while behind her on the pale green wall, her shadow loomed distinct, grotesque, and sexless. But Molly was in the mood when the need to talk — to let oneself go — is so great that the choice of a listener is little more than an accident. She had discovered at last — discovered in that illuminating moment in Applegate—the meaning of the homesickness, of the restlessness, of the despondency of the last few months. Before she could understand what Abel had meant to her, she had been obliged to draw away from him, to measure him from a distance, to put the lucid revealing silence between them. It was like looking at a mountain, when one must fall back to the right angle of view, must gain the proper perspective, before one can judge of the space it fills on the horizon. What she needed was merely to see Abel in relation to other things in her life, to learn how immeasurably he towered above them. Her blood rushed through her veins with a burning sweetness, and while she stood there watching Kesiah, the wonder and the intoxication of magic was upon her. She had passed within the Enchanter's circle, and her soul was dancing to the music of flutes.

"Aunt Kesiah," she asked suddenly, and her voice thrilled, "were you ever in love?"

Kesiah looked up from the sheets with the expression of a person who has been interrupted in the serious business of life by the flutterings of a humming-bird. It required an effort for her to recede from the comfortable habit of thought she had attained to the point of view from which the aspirations of the soul had appeared of more importance than the satisfactions of the body. Only for a few weeks in the spring did she relapse periodically into such a condition of mind.

"Never," she answered.

"Did you never feel that you cared about anybody — in that way?"

"Never."

"You didn't have the least bit of a romance when you were young?"

"Never."

It was incredible! It was appalling! But it really had happened! Love, which filled the world, was not the beginning and the end, as it ought to be, of every mortal existence. Subtract it from the universe and there was nothing left but a void, yet in this void, life seemed to move and feed and have its being just as if it were really alive. People indeed — even women — could go on, like Kesiah, for almost sixty years, and not share, for an instant, the divine impulse of creation. They could exist quite comfortably on three meals a day without ever suspecting the terrible emptiness that there was inside of them. They could even wring a stale satisfaction out of this imitation existence — this play of make-believe being alive. And around them all the time there was the wonder and the glory of the universe!

Then Kesiah turned suddenly from the radiator, and there was an expression in her face which reminded Molly of the old lady with the bonnet trimmed with artificial purple wistaria she had seen on the train — an expression of useless knowledge and regret, as though she realized that she had missed the essential thing and that it was life, after all, that had been to blame for it. For a minute only the look lasted, for Kesiah's was a closed soul, and the smallest revelation of herself was like the agony of travail.

"If you don't mind, dear, will you carry these sheets to Patsey for Angela's bed," she said.

At the time Gay had been only half in earnest when he promised to take Molly to Old Church, and he presented himself at breakfast next morning with the unspoken hope in his heart that she had changed her mind during the night. When she met him with her hat on, he inquired facetiously if she contemplated a journey, and proceeded to make light of her response that the carriage was ordered to take them to the station.

"But we'll starve if we go there," he urged, "the servants are scattered, and the luncheon I got last time was a subject for bad language."

"I'll cook you one, Jonathan. I can cook beautifully," she said.

The idea amused him. After all they could easily get back to dinner.

"I wonder if you know that you are a nuisance, Molly?" he asked, smiling, and she saw that she had won. Winning was just as easy with Jonathan as it had been with Reuben or with Abel.

It was a brilliant day, in the midst of a brief spell of Indian summer. When they left the train and drove along the corduroy road from Applegate, the forest on either side of them was gorgeous in gold and copper. Straight ahead, at the end of the long vista, they could see a bit of cloudless sky beyond the low outlines of a field; and both sky and field were wrapped in a faint purplish haze. The few belated yellow butterflies, floating over the moist places in the road, seemed to drift pensively in the autumnal stillness.

On the long drive hardly a word was spoken, for Gay was occupied with the cigar he had not had time to smoke after breakfast, and Molly was thinking that but for Reuben's death, she would never have accepted Mr. Jonathan's legacy and parted from Abel.

"All this has happened because I went along the Haunt's Walk and not across the east meadow that April afternoon," she thought, "but for that, Jonathan would not have kissed me and Abel and I should not have quarrelled." It was such a little thing — only the eighth of a mile which had decided her future. She might just as easily have turned aside if she had only suspected. But life was like that — you never suspected until things had happened, and the little decisions, made in the midst of your ignorance, committed you to your destiny.

The horses came out of the wood, plodding over the sandy soil, which marked the beginning of the open country. Across the fields toward Bottom's Ordinary, scattered groups of people were walking in twos and threes, showing like disfiguring patches in the midst of the golden rod and the life-everlasting. Old Adam, hobbling up the path, while the horses stopped to drink at the well, touched his hat as he steadied himself with the aid of his big knotted stick.

"It's a fine sight to see you back among us," he said. "If you'd come a couple of hours earlier you'd have been in time for the wedding."

"What wedding?" asked Gay in a clear voice, but moved by some intuitive knowledge of what the answer would be, he did not look at Molly.

"Why, Solomon Hatch's daughter, Judy, to be sure. She's jest married the miller." For a minute he stopped, coughed, spat and then added: "Mr. Mullen tied 'em up tight all by heart, without so much as glancin' at the book. Ah, that young parson may have his faults, an' be unsound on the doctrine of baptism, but he can lay on matrimony with as pious an air as if he was conductin' a funeral."

He fell back as Gay nodded pleasantly, and the wheels grated over the rocky ground by the well. With a slow flick of the long whip, the carriage crossed the three roads and rolled rapidly into the turnpike. And while she gazed straight ahead into the flat distance, Molly was thinking, "All this has happened because I went down the Haunt's Walk that April afternoon and not over the east meadow."

CHAPTER VII

A NEW BEGINNING TO AN OLD TRAGEDY

THE wedding was over. Mr. Mullen had read the service in his melodious voice, gazing straight over the Prayer-book as though he saw a vision in the sunbeam above Judy's head. On that solitary occasion his soul, which revolted from what he described in secret as the "Methodistical low church atmosphere" of his parish, had adorned the simple words with the facial solemnity that accompanies an elaborate ritual.

From the front pew, Sarah Revercomb, in full widow's weeds, had glared stonily at the Reverend Orlando, as if she suspected him of some sinister intention to tamper with the ceremony. At her side, Solomon Hatch's little pointed beard might have been seen rising and falling as it followed the rhythmic sound of the clergyman's voice. When the service was over, and the congregation filed out into the leaf-strewn paths of the churchyard, it was generally decided that Mr. Mullen's delivery had never been surpassed in the memory of the several denominations.

"'Twas when he came to makin' Abel say 'with all my worldly goods' that he looked his grandest," commented old Adam, as he started for Solomon's cottage between Sarah and Mrs. Hatch. "But, them are solemn words an' he was wise to give a man pause for thought. Thar ain't a mo' inspirin' sentence in the whole Prayer-book than that."

"Well, marriage ain't all promisin'," observed Sarah, "thar's a deal to it besides, an' they're both likely to find it out befo' they're much older."

Old Adam, who never contradicted a woman unless he was married to her, agreed to this with some unintelligible mutterings through his toothless gums, while Mrs. Hatch remarked with effusive amiability that "it's a sad sight to see a daughter go, even though she's a stepchild. It's a comfort to think," she added immediately, "that Judy's got a God-fearin', pious husband an' one with no nonsense about him for all his good looks."

"I ain't so sure about the nonsense," retorted Sarah, "Abel's got to be managed like all men folk, an' he ain't so different from the rest of 'em, unless it is that he's mo' set."

She harboured a carefully concealed opinion that Abel was "stooping" to marry Judy, for the Hatches were particularly thriftless and had never succeeded in paying a long standing mortgage. Besides, they were in the habit of using their parlour commonly on week days, and Mrs. Hatch had once been seen at church in a calico dress — though, it was true, she had slipped out of the side door before the service was over. Added to these things, Sarah had observed of late that Judy showed an inclination to shirk her duties, and had a dangerous habit of "mooning" while she was at the wash tub.

"Well, I like a man that's set, myself," rejoined Mrs. Hatch, as effusive as ever. "I used to say thar never was anybody so set as my first husband till I got my second."

"I ain't had so wide an experience as you," replied

Sarah, as if she were condescending to an acknowledged lapse in virtue. "Thar's a difference between marryin' for the sake of matrimony, which is right an' proper accordin' to Scripture, an' marryin' for the sake of a man, which is a sign of weakness in a woman."

"You ain't a friend to the feelin's of natur, ma'am," remarked old Adam, with respect.

"No, thar never was much natur in me," responded Sarah, lifting her bombazine skirt with both hands as she stepped over a puddle. Her floating crape veil, bought ten years after her husband's death, with the money made from her turkeys, represented the single extravagance as well as the solitary ambition of her life. Even as a child she had longed ardently to wear crape, and this secret aspiration, which had smouldered in the early poverty-stricken years of her marriage, had burst suddenly into flame when she found herself a widow. During the burial service over her husband, while she had sat bowed in musty black cotton, which had been loaned her by a neighbour, she had vowed earnestly that she would wear weeds yet for Abner before she died. Ten years of scraping and saving were devoted to this sacred resolve, and now, twenty years after the death of Abner Revercomb, she was wearing a crape veil for him to his son's wedding. As she walked, so strong a smell of camphor floated from her garments, that old Adam sneezed twice, and then muttered hurriedly that "'twas the very season for chills." Something of her secret pride in her garb of mourning had entered into him while he limped beside her on his rheumatic old legs.

Instead of stopping with the others for the wedding feast at Solomon's cottage, Sarah pleaded a sudden palpitation of the heart, and hurried home to put the house in order before the arrival of the bride. Already she had prepared the best chamber and set the supper table with her blue and white china, but as she walked quietly home from church at the side of old Adam, she had remembered, with a sensation of panic, that she had forgotten to make up the feather bed, which she rolled over for an airing. Not a speck of dust was left on the floor or windows, and a little later, while she began spreading the sheets, without waiting to remove her bonnet, she thought proudly that Judy had probably never stayed in so entirely respectable a chamber in her life. Even the pitcher and basin were elaborately ornamented with peonies, the colour of the sampler in crewel work over the washstand; and on the bureau, between two crochetted mats of an intricate pattern, there was a pincushion in the shape of a monstrous tomato.

Yes, it was all ready for them, she reflected, while she stood in the doorway and surveyed the results of her handiwork. "Thar's something wantin'," she observed presently to herself. "I never could feel that a weddin' or a funeral was finished without a calla lily somewhere around." Going downstairs to the kitchen, she clipped the last forced blossoms of an unusual size from her "prize" plant, and brought them back in a small glass vase to decorate Judy's bureau. "Now it's just like it was when I was married," she thought, "an' it's just as it will be when Abel's sons are bringin' home their brides." There was no sentiment in her thoughts, for she regarded sentiment as a mere morbid stimulant to the kind of emotion she considered both dangerous and useless. Even the look on Abel's face, which she had been forced to recognize as that of despair, seemed to her, on the whole, a safer expression than one of a too-exultant joy. She was not afraid of despair — its manifestations were familiar to her, and she had usually found them amenable to the laws of propriety. But she felt vaguely that happiness in some mysterious way was related to sin, and the shameless ecstasy with which Abel had announced his engagement to Molly had branded his emotion as positively immoral in her sight. "No decent feelin' is goin' to make anybody's face shine like a brass plate," she had said to herself.

After straightening the crochetted mats for the last time, she went downstairs to the kitchen to describe the wedding to the two old people, who, chained to their chairs by rheumatism, were on the point of bursting with curiosity.

"An' you didn't bring me so much as a bite of cake," whimpered grandmother, seeing her empty hands. "Here I've been settin' all day in this cheer with my mouth waterin' for that weddin' cake."

"I'm just as sure as I can be that Mrs. Hatch is goin' to send you some by Blossom," replied Sarah soothingly.

"Ah, to think of Abel bein' at his own weddin' an' we settin' here," piped grandfather. "'Twas a hasty business, but we Revercombs were al'ays the folk to swallow our puddin' while 'twas smokin' an' then cry out that we didn't know 'twas hot. I never knew one of us that didn't have to larn he was a fool befo' he could come at any wisdom."

"Well, I ain't got anything particular against the girl," said Sarah, "but it's my bounden belief that she'll turn out a slattern. Thar's something moonstruck about her — you can tell it by that shiftin', skeered-rabbit look in her eyes. She's just the sort to sweep all the trash under the bed an' think she's cleaned up a room."

"It's amazin', the small sense men have in sech matters," remarked grandfather. "Thar's a feelin' among us, I don't know whar it comes from, that the little and squinched-up women generally run to virtue."

"Oh, I ain't sayin' she's not a good girl accordin' to her lights," returned Sarah, "an', after all, it ain't a man but his mother that suffers from a slattern. Well, I must go an' lay off my weeds befo' it's time for 'em to get here. Don't you fret, ma, Mrs. Hatch is surely goin' to send you something."

Inspired by this prophecy, grandmother began immediately to show signs of reviving hope, and a little later, when the sound of wheels was heard on the road, she was seized with an anticipation so violent that she fluttered like a withered leaf in the wind. Then the wheels stopped at the gate, and Blossom and Mr. Mullen entered, bearing a small basket, which contained disordered remains of the wedding feast.

"Whar's Abel?" inquired Sarah, bowing stiffly to the young clergyman.

"We passed them in the road. My horse for once outstripped his mare," replied Mr. Mullen, who felt a crawling sensation in the back of his neck whenever Sarah was present, as if he were called upon to face in her single person an entire parsimonious vestry. "I had the pleasure of driving your granddaughter home, and now I must be going back to bring mother.

It was a delightful occasion, Mrs. Revercomb, and you are to be congratulated on the charming addition to your family." He hadn't meant to use the word "charming" — he had intended to say "estimable" instead — but Sarah embarrassed him by her expression, and it slipped out before he was aware of it. Her manner annoyed him excessively. It was as bad as looking up suddenly in the midst of one of the finest paragraphs in his sermon and meeting a supercilious look on a face in his congregation.

"Humph!" observed Sarah shortly, and when he had gone, she emitted the sound again, half to herself, half to her audience, "humph!"

"What's the matter, grandma?" inquired Blossom listlessly, "you don't look as if you were pleased."

"Oh, I'm pleased," replied Sarah curtly. "I'm pleased. Did you notice how yellow Abel was lookin' at the weddin'? What he needs is a good dose of castor oil. I've seen him like that befo', an' I know."

"Oh, grandma! how can you? who ever heard of anybody taking castor oil on their wedding day?"

"Well, thar's a lot of 'em that would better," rejoined Sarah in her tart manner. The perfection of Mr. Mullen's behaviour in church combined with her forgetfulness to make up the feather bed had destroyed her day, and her irritation expressed itself as usual in a moral revolt from her surroundings. "To think of makin' all this fuss about that pop-eyed Judy Hatch," she thought, and a minute later she said aloud, "Thar they are now; Blossom, you take Judy upstairs to her room an' I'll see after Abel. It ain't any use contradictin' me. He's in for a bilious spell just as sure as you are born." She spoke irritably, for her anxiety about Abel's liver covered a deeper disquietude, and she was battling with all the obstinacy of the Hawtreys against the acknowledgment that the ailment she was preparing to dose with drugs was a simple malady of the soul. In her moral universe, sin and virtue were two separate entities, as easily distinguished on the surface as any other phenomena. That a mere feeling, not produced by a disordered liver, could make a man wear that drawn and desperate look in his face, appeared to her both unnatural and reprehensible.

But Abel did not appear, though Sarah awaited his entrance with a bottle in her hand. As soon as he had turned his mare out to pasture, he crossed the road to the mill, and stopping beside the motionless wheel, watched the excited swallows fly back and forth overhead. He knew how a man felt who was given a life sentence in prison for an act committed in a moment of madness. Why he had ever asked Judy to marry him — why he had gone on calmly approaching the day of his wedding — he could no more explain than he could explain the motives which impelled him to the absurdities in a nightmare. It was all a part of the terrible and yet useful perversity of life — of the perversity that enables a human being to pass from inconsistency to inconsistency without pausing in his course to reflect on his folly.

In front of him was the vivid green rise in the meadow, which showed like a burst of spring in the midst of the November landscape. Beyond it, the pines were etched in sharp outlines on the bright blue sky, where a buzzard was sailing slowly in search of food.

The weather was so perfect that the colours of the fields and the sky borrowed the intense and unreal look of objects seen in a crystal.

"Well, it's over and done," said Abel to himself; "it's over and done, and I'm glad of it." It seemed to him while he spoke that it was his life, not his marriage, to which he alluded — that he had taken the final, the irremediable step, and there was nothing to come afterwards. The uncertainty and the suspense were at an end, for the clanging of the prison doors behind him was still in his ears. To-morrow would be like yesterday, the next year would be like the last. Forgetting his political ambition, he told himself passionately that there was nothing ahead of him — nothing to look forward to. Vaguely he realized that inconsistent and irreconcilable as his actions appeared, they had been, in fact, held together by a single connecting thread, that one dominant feeling had inspired all of his motives. If he had never loved Molly, he saw clearly now, he should never have rushed into his marriage with Judy. Pity had driven him first in the direction of love — he remembered the pang that had racked his heart at the story of the forsaken Janet — and pity again had urged him to the supreme folly of his marriage. All his life he had been led astray by this impulse, as other men are led astray by a temptation for drink.

"Poor Judy," he said aloud after a minute, "she deserves to be happy and I'm going to try with all the strength that is in me to make her so."

And then there rose before him, as if it moved in answer to his resolve, a memory of the past so vivid that it seemed to exist not only in his thoughts, but in the radiant autumn fields at which he was looking. All the old passionate sweetness, as sharp as pain, appeared to float there in the Indian summer before him. Rapture or agony? He could not tell, but he knew that he had lost it forever.

Turning away, he recrossed the log, and stood for a moment, hesitating, with his hand on the gate. A decrepit figure, hobbling with bent head through a golden cloud of dust, signed to him to stop, and while he waited, he made out the person of old Adam, slightly the worse, he gathered, for the wedding feast.

"I tarried thar till the last, hopin' to have still another taste of toddy," remarked the aged merry-maker. "When a man has turned ninety he might as well cease to take thought for his morals, an' let the natchel bent of 'em have a chance."

It was plain that his last glass had been too much for him, and that, for the first time in his temperate career, he was rapidly approaching a condition of alcoholic ecstasy.

"You'd better go home and take a nap," said Abel kindly. "You can't very well get lost between here and your house, or I'd go with you."

"It warn't the weddin' glass that was too much for me," replied the old man at the point of tears, "'twas the one I had arterwards at the or'nary. Not wishin' to depart from an old custom on account of a rare festival, I stopped at Mrs. Bottom's just as young Mr. Jonathan an' Reuben Merryweather's gal drove up from Applegate. Ah, sech a sight as she was—all in shot silk that rustled when you looked at it —— an' as pretty as a pictur."

"So they've come back?" asked Abel, almost in a whisper.

"Yes, they've come back, an' a sad comin' it was for her, as I could see in her face. 'What are you wearin' yo' Sunday best for, Mr. Doolittle?' asked Mr. Jonathan, spry as a cricket. 'It's a fine weddin' I've been to, Mr. Jonathan,' I answered, 'an' I've seen two lovin' hearts beatin' as one befo' Mr. Mullen at the altar.' Then Reuben Merryweather's gal called out right quickly, 'Whose weddin', old Adam?' an' when I replied, 'Abel Revercomb's,' as I was bound to, her face went as white as a ha'nt right thar befo' me——"

"You'd better go home or you won't be in any condition to walk there," said Abel angrily. "It's downright indecent to see a man of your age rocking about in the road."

Turning quickly in his tracks, he went over the log again and on to the loneliness of the meadows beyond.

"And she went as white as a haunt," he muttered under his breath.

CHAPTER VIII

A GREAT PASSION IN A HUMBLE PLACE

TIME does not stand still even for the unhappily married. A man may have wedded the wrong woman, but he comes down to his breakfast and goes about his work as punctually as if he had wedded the right one. To Abel, with the thought of Molly throbbing like a fever in his brain, it was still possible to grind his grist and to subtract carefully the eighth part as a toll — while Judy, hushed in day dreams, went on making butter in a habit of absent-minded tranquillity. Life seldom deals in cataclysmic situations — at least on the surface. Living side by side in a married intimacy for months, Abel and Judy were still strangers to each other. Their bodies touched while their souls were crucified at an immeasurable distance.

To Sarah, who embraced Christian theology while she practised religiously the doctrine of the physical basis of life, there had seemed no cause for disturbance, until Judy entered the kitchen on a stormy evening in June, and turned a pair of inflamed eyes on the face of her mother-in-law. The young woman wore her wedding dress, now nearly seven months old, and clasped in her hand a neatly bound Prayer-book which had been the gift of the Reverend Orlando. For more than six months she had suffered silently under Sarah's eyes, which saw only outward and visible afflictions. Now, at the first sign of quivering flesh, the older woman was at once on the alert.

"Whar you goin', Judy?" she inquired. "You ain't thinkin' about traipsin' out of doors a night like this, are you?"

"Archie promised to take me to the Bible class, an' he hasn't come back," replied Judy, while her face worked convulsively. "I've waited for him since half past seven."

"If that don't beat all!" exclaimed Sarah. "Why, it's thunderin' like Jedgment Day. Can't you hear it?"

"But I promised Mr. Mullen I wouldn't let anything prevent me," returned Judy, growing sullen. "Archie said he'd be back here without fail, an' I know he's stayed to supper over at the Halloweens'."

"Isn't it foolish to wear your best hat out in the rain?" asked Blossom, not without surprise, for her sister-in-law had developed into something of a slattern.

"I reckon hats are made to be worn," retorted Judy. As a rule her temper was placid enough, but Archie's defection, after she had given him her best neck-tie for the purpose of binding him to his promise, had overstrained the tension of her nerves. "Where's Abner? He used to go regular."

"He's gone upstairs so tired that he can barely hist his foot," replied Sarah. "You'd better let that Bible class alone this evening, Judy. Yo' salvation ain't dependin' on it, I reckon."

But in Judy's colourless body there dwelt, unknown to Nature, which has no sense of the ridiculous, the soul of a Cleopatra. At the moment she would cheerfully have died of an asp sooner than relinquish the study of Exodus under the eyes of the rector. In the arid stretch of her existence a great passion had flamed, and like most great passions, it was ruthless, destroying, and utterly selfish. She had made butter all day with the hope of that Bible class in her mind, and she was determined that, whatever it cost the Revercombs, she should have her reward this evening in the commendation of the young clergyman. That mere thunder and lightning should keep her from his side appeared to her little less than absurd. She knew that he had received a call within the week, and she would have walked unshod over burning ploughshares in order to hear him say that he had declined it.

"I've got to go," she insisted stubbornly. "If there isn't anybody to go with me, I'll go alone."

"Why, if you're so bent on it I'll take you myself," said Abel, looking up from the barrel of his gun, which he was cleaning. His manner to Judy was invariably kind and even solicitous, to a degree which caused Sarah to tell herself at times that "it wasn't natural an' wasn't goin' to last." As long as men would behave themselves quietly, and go about their business with the unfailing regularity of the orthodox, she preferred, on the whole, that they should avoid any unusual demonstration of virtue. An extreme of conduct whether good or bad made her uneasy. She didn't like, as she put it in her own mind, "anything out of the way." Once when Abel, nettled by some whim of Judy's, had retorted with a slight show of annoyance, his mother had experienced a positive sensation of relief, while she said to herself with a kind of triumph that "the old Adam was thar still."

"You've got that hackin' cough, Abel, an' you oughtn't to go out in this storm," remarked Sarah, with an uneasiness she could not conceal.

"Oh, it won't hurt me. I'm a pine knot. Are you ready, Judy?"

"It's such a little way," said Judy, still sullen under her mother-in-law's disapproval. When Abel coughed once, while he was getting into his rubber coat, she glanced at him angrily. Why couldn't he have waited at least until he got out of doors? Instead of gratitude she bore him a dull resentment for having married her, and when she looked back on her hard life in her father's house, she beheld it through that rosy veil of idealism in which the imaginative temperament envelops the past or the future at the cost of the present. Then she had had time, at least, to dream and to dawdle! During the seven months of her marriage, she had learned that for the brooding soul there is no anodyne so soothing as neglect, no comfort so grateful as freedom to be unhappy.

When the door closed behind them Sarah looked at Blossom with an eloquent expression. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed, and wrung the dough from her hands into the tray over which she was standing. "Well, I never!"

"I don't believe it's right for Abel to give in to Judy as he does," said Blossom.

"I never saw a Revercomb that warn't a fool about something," answered Sarah. "It don't matter so much what 'tis about, but it's obliged to be about something."

Blossom sighed and bent lower over the seam she was running. She had long since ceased to draw any consolation from her secret marriage, and her wedding ring (bought weeks after the ceremony by Gay) caused her pain rather than pleasure when it pressed into her bosom, where it hung suspended by a blue ribbon from her neck. Her strong Saxon instinct for chastity — for the integrity of feminine virtue — sometimes awoke in her, and then she would think exultingly, "At least I am married!" But even this amazing triumph of morality — of the spirit of Sarah Revercomb over the spirit of the elder Jonathan Gay — showed pallid and bloodless beside the evanescent passion to which she had been sacrificed. Destiny, working through her temperament, had marked her for victory, but it had been only one of those brief victories which herald defeats. The forces of law and order — the sound racial instincts which make for the preservation of society — these had won in the event, though they had been, after all, powerless to change the ultimate issue. The spirit of old Jonathan, as well as the spirit of Sarah, was immortal. The racial battle between the soldier of fortune and the militant Calvinist was not yet fought to a finish.

"I believe Abel would give Judy the clothes on his back if he thought she wanted them," said Blossom, in the effort to turn her musings away from her own troubles.

"It ain't natural," rejoined Sarah stubbornly. "It's a man's natur to be mean about money matters whar his wife is concerned, an' when he begins to be different it's a sign that thar's a screw loose somewhar inside of him. My Abner was sech a spendthrift that he'd throw away a day's market prices down at the or'nary, but he used to expect the money from a parcel of turkeys to keep me in clothes and medicines and doctor's bills, to say nothin' of household linen an' groceries for the whole year round."

Blossom sighed softly, "I don't suppose there ever was a man who could see that a woman needed anything except presents now and then," she said, "unless it's Abel. Do you know, grandma, I sometimes think he's so kind to Judy because he knows he doesn't love her."

"Well, I reckon, if thar's got to be a choice between love and kindness, I'd hold on to kindness," retorted Sarah.

It was ten o'clock before Abel and Judy returned, and from the hurried and agitated manner of their entrance, it was plain that the Bible class had not altogether appeased Judy's temper.

"She's worn out, that's the matter," explained Abel, while they stopped to dry themselves in the kitchen.

"You go straight upstairs to bed, Judy," said Sarah, "an' I'll send you up a cup of gruel by Abel. You oughtn't to have gone streakin' out in this rain, an' it's natural that it should have upset you."

"It wasn't the rain," replied Judy, and the instant afterwards, she burst into tears and ran out of the room before they could stop her.

"I declar', I never saw anybody carry on so in my life," observed Sarah.

Abel glanced at her with a perplexed and anxious frown on his brow. "You ought to be patient with her in her condition," he said. His own patience was inexhaustible, and its root, as Blossom had suspected, lay in his remorseful indifference. With Molly he had not been patient, but he had loved her.

"Don't talk to me about patience," rejoined Sarah, "haven't I had nine an' lost six?"

She was entirely without the sentiment which her son felt regarding the physical function of motherhood, for like the majority of sentiments, it had worn thin when it had been stretched over a continual repetition of facts. To Abel the mystery was still shrouded in a veil of sympathy, and was hardly to be thought of without tenderness. But his solicitude merely nettled Sarah. Nobody had ever "carried on" over her when she had had her nine.

"Have you said anything sharp to her to-day, mother?" he inquired suspiciously, after a minute.

"You know I ain't, Abel. She left a dirty glass in the dairy an' I never so much as mentioned it. Did Mr. Mullen complain of her leavin' off mission work?"

"Why, of course not. He talked to us only a few minutes and he seemed absent-minded. He's had a good call somewhere in the North, and he told us that he had prayed over it unceasingly and he believed that the Lord was directing him to larger fields."

"Did Judy hear that?"

"Yes, he told us both."

Sarah was stirring the gruel, and she appeared so absorbed in her task that the remark she let fall a minute later bore presumably no relation to the conversation.

"I sometimes think men ain't got any mo' sense than an unborn babe!" she observed.

Taking the cup from her hands, Abel went up the little staircase to the bedroom, where Judy stood before the bureau, with a long black-headed hat pin in her hand. She had evidently not begun to undress, for her hat was still on her head, and under the heavy shadow of the brim her eyes looked back at her husband with an accusing and hostile expression.

"Drink this, Judy, while it is hot," he said kindly, placing the cup on the bureau.

"I don't want it," she answered, and her voice sounded as if she were ready to burst again into tears.

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"I'm going to sleep in the attic. Call me if you want anything."

Without replying she took off her hat and placed it on the top shelf in the wardrobe. Had he beaten her she felt that she could almost have loved him, but the primitive sex instinct in her was outraged by his gentleness.

"Has anybody hurt your feelings?" asked Abel, turning suddenly on his way to the door.

"No."

"Did the rector speak about your giving up mission work?"

"No."

"Then, for God's sake, what is it?" he demanded, at his wit's end. "You look as if you'd lost the last friend you had on earth."

At this she broke into hard dry sobs which rattled in in her throat before they escaped. A spasm of self-pity worked convulsively in her bosom, and, turning away, she buried her face in her arms, while the long, agonized tremors shook her slender figure. Looking at her, he remembered bitterly that he had married Judy in order to make her happy. By the sacrifice of his own inclinations he had achieved this disastrous result. If he had tried to do evil instead of good, he could hardly have wrought more irreparable mischief — and with the thought, pity, which had led him astray, winged off, like an ironic sprite, and left his heart empty of comfort.

"God knows I am sorry for you, Judy," he said in the effort to reinforce his compassion.

But Judy, though she was avid of sympathy, did not crave an expression of it from her husband — for her temperament was of the morbid kind that is happiest when it is most miserable. Her heart had fed upon the sustenance of her brain until the abnormal enlargement of that single organ had prepared her for inevitable suffering at the hands of men — if not from actual unkindness, yet from an amiable neglect which could cut even more deeply. She turned in the direction of sentiment as instinctively as a plant turns toward light, and the Reverend Orlando Mullen had had predecessors in her affections who had been hardly so much as aware of her existence.

As Abel went out of the door, her accusing eyes followed him while she thought, with sentimental regret, of the many things she had given up when she married — of Mrs. Mullen's ironing day, of the rector's darning, of the red flannel petticoats she had no longer time to make for the Hottentots. It was over one of these flannel petticoats that Mr. Mullen had first turned to her with his earnest and sympathetic look, as though he were probing her soul. At the moment she had felt that his casual words held a hidden meaning, and to this day, though she had pondered them in sleepless nights ever since, she was still undecided.

"I don't believe he ever knew how much I cared," she said, as she started mechanically to take out her hairpins.

CHAPTER IX

A MEETING IN THE PASTURE

As Judy did not appear next morning, her breakfast was carried up to her by Sarah, who allowed her own cakes to become leathery while she arranged the tray. Her feet were still on the staircase, when Blossom turned to Abel and said in a furtive and anxious voice:

"Mrs. Bottom told me yesterday the Gays were coming back to Jordan's Journey. Have you heard anything about it?"

"No, I haven't heard," he answered indifferently, though his pulses throbbed at the words. Rising from the table an instant later, he went out into the yard, where the sunshine filtered softly through June foliage. By the porch a damask rose-bush was in bloom, and the fragrance followed him along the path between the borders of portulaca. At the gate he found a young robin too weak to fly, and lifting it carefully, he returned it to the nest in a pear-tree. Like all young and helpless things, it aroused in him a tenderness which, in some strange way, was akin to pain.

On the crooked sycamore the young leaves fluttered with shirred edges, and beyond the mill and the fallow field, the slender green ribbons of the corn were unfolding. As he gazed at the pines on the horizon, he remembered the day he had swung his axe in joy under their branches, and it seemed to him, while he looked back upon it, that the hour belonged to the distant memories of his boyhood.

"It's over now, and I'm not going to whine about it," he said aloud to his hound. "A plain fool is bad enough, Moses, my boy, but a whining fool is the meanest thing God ever made in man or dog. Because I've lost the thing I wanted most, I've no mind to wallow in the dust — but, oh, Molly, Molly!"

She came to him again, not fair and flitting, but ardent and tender, with her parted red mouth raised to his, and the light and darkness trembling on her face like faint shadows in the wind. And this vision of her, which was so vivid that it shook his heart with a pang of agony, seemed saying to him in words which were not his — which were not words at all, but some subtler communion of sense—"I am to be loved, but never possessed, for, like the essence of desire, I elude forever the conditions of mortality."

A week later, while the thought of her burned like fire in his brain, he met her face to face in the path which led from the blazed pine over the pasture to Jordan's Journey. Had he seen her in time, he would have fled from the meeting, but she appeared without warning as he turned from the turnpike to the bars. Almost before he was aware of it, he was within touch of her and looking into her eyes. She wore her black dress still, and the air of elegance, of strangeness, was even more obvious than when he had met her at Applegate the day before his marriage. Her face had lost a little of its bloom, and there was a look in it which he had never seen there before — a look which was wistful and yet expectant, as though, like old Reuben, she was hoping against knowledge and in despite of disapointment.

"Molly!" he cried, and stopped short, longing to touch her hand and yet with something, which was like conscience in the shape of Judy, restraining him.

"Abel, how little you've changed!" she said.

"Haven't I? Well, you're yourself, too, and yet you're different."

"Different? I suppose you mean I'm wearing better clothes?"

He smiled for the first time. "I wasn't thinking about your clothes. They never seemed to matter."

What he had meant, though he dared not utter the thought aloud, was that she had grown softer and gentler, and was less the Molly of the flashing charm and the defiant challenge.

"Yes, I've changed in a way, of course," she admitted presently, "I feel grown up now, and I never felt so before. Life was all play to me until grandfather died."

"And it isn't now?"

"Not entirely — I'm still growing."

Her hand rested on the bars beside which she was standing, and the fragrant festoons of wild grape blooming beside the post, brushed softly against her bosom. There was a quietness, a suggestion of restraint in her attitude which he had never seen in the old Molly.

"The day you went away you told me you wanted to live," he said.

"I remember. I couldn't have done differently. I had to find out things for myself. Of course, life is all just the same everywhere, but then I didn't know it. I used to think that one had only to travel a certain distance and one would pass the boundary of the commonplace and come into the country of adventure. It was silly, of course, but you see I didn't know any better. It was the fret of youth, I suppose, though people never seem to think that women ever feel it — or, perhaps, as Mrs. Bottom used to say, it was only the Gay blood working off."

"I don't like to hear you talk of the Gay blood in you," he said quickly.

His voice betrayed him, and looking up, she asked quietly, "How is Judy, Abel?"

"She's not well. It seems she suffers with her nerves."

"I'm coming to see her. Judy and I were always friends, you know."

"Yes, I know. You were a friend to every woman."

"And I am still. I've grown to love Aunt Kesiah, and I believe I'm the only person who sees just how fine she is."

"Your grandfather saw, I think. Do you remember he used to say life was always ready to teach us things, but that some of us were so mortal slow we never learned till we died?"

Her eyes were starry as she looked away from him over the meadow. "Abel, I miss him so," she said after a minute.

"I know, Molly, I know."

"Nothing makes up for him. All the rest seems so distant and unhuman. Nothing is so real to me as the memory of him sitting in his chair on the porch with Spot at his feet."

For a minute he did not reply, and when he spoke at last, it was only to say:

"I wonder if a single human being could ever understand you, Molly?"

"I don't understand myself. I don't even try."

"You've had everything you could want for a year — been everywhere — seen everything — yet, I believe, you'd give it all up to be back in the cottage over there with Reuben and his hound?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she answered passionately, "that was what I loved."

"I suppose you're right," he said a little sadly, "that was always what you loved."

She turned her head away, but he saw the delicate flush pass from her cheek to her throat.

"I mean I am faithful to the things that really matter," she answered.

"And the things that do not really matter are men?" he asked with a humour in which there was a touch of grimness.

"Perhaps you're right about some of them, at least," she answered, smiling at a memory. "I was full of animal spirits — of the joy of energy, and there was no other outlet. A girl sows her mental wild oats, if she has any mind, just as a boy does. But what people never seem to realize is that women go on and change just as men do. They seem to think that a girl stands perfectly still, that what she is at twenty, she remains to the end of her life. Of course that's absurd. After the first shock of real experience that old make-believe side of things lost all attraction for me. I could no more go back to flirting with Mr. Mullen or with Jim Halloween than I could sit down in the road and make mud pies for an amusement. How is Mr. Mullen, by the way?" she inquired in a less serious tone.

"Just the same. He's had a call."

"And old Adam? Is he still living?"

"He can't walk any longer, but his mind is perfectly clear. Sometimes his son puts his chair into an oxcart and brings him over to the ordinary. He's still the best talker about here, and he frets if he is left by himself."

For a moment they were silent again. Old Adam, having fulfilled his purpose, was dismissed into space. Molly watched Abel's eyes turn to the pines on the horizon, and in the midst of the June meadow, there was a look in them that reminded her of the autumnal sadness of nature. She had seen this look in Reuben's face when he gazed wistfully at the blossoming apple boughs in the spring, and the thought came to her that just this attitude of soul — this steadfast courage in the face of circumstance — was the thing that life was meant to teach them both at the end. If Abel's energy was now less effervescent, she realized instinctively that it had become more assured. Life or marriage — or, perhaps, both together had "tamed" him, as Reuben had prophesied, and the rough edges of his character had worn smooth in the process.

A butterfly, marked gorgeously in blue and orange, alighted on the bar by her hand, and when it fluttered off again, drunken with summer, her gaze followed it into the meadow, where the music of innumerable bees filled the sunshine.

"And you, Abel?" she asked, turning presently, "what of yourself?"

He smiled at her before answering; and with the smile, she felt again the old physical joy in his presence — in his splendid animal vitality, in the red-brown colour of his flesh, in the glow of his dark eyes, which smiled down into hers. No other man had ever made this appeal to her senses. She had struggled sometimes like a bird in a net against the memory of it, yet it had held her, in spite of her will, even when she was farthest away from him. The gentleness from which Judy revolted, brought Molly's heart back to him with a longing to comfort.

"Well, I'm learning," he answered, still smiling.

"And you are happy?"

He made a gesture of assent, while he looked over her head at the butterfly — which had found its mate and was soaring heavenward in a flight of ecstasy. The same loyalty which had prevented his touching her hand when they met, rebelled now against an implied reflection on Judy.

"I am glad," she said, "you deserve it."

She had given her eyes to him almost unconsciously, and their look was like a cord which drew them slowly to each other. His pulses hammered in his ears, yet he heard around him still the mellow murmuring of bees, and saw the butterflies whirling deliriously together. All the forces which had held him under restraint stretched suddenly, while he met her eyes, like bands that were breaking. Before the solitary primal fact of his love for her, the fog of tradition with which civilization has enveloped the simple relation of man and woman, evaporated in the sunlight. The harsh outlines of the future were veiled, and he saw only the present, crowned, radiant, and sweet to the senses as the garlands of wild grape around which the golden bees hung in a cloud. For an instant only the vision held him; then the rush of desire faded slowly, and some unconquerable instinct, of which he had been almost unconscious, asserted its supremacy in his brain. The ghosts of dead ancestors who had adhered to law at the cost of happiness; the iron skeleton of an outgrown and yet an indelibly implanted creed; the tenacity of the racial structure against which his individual impulses had rebelled — these things, or one of these things, proved in the end stronger than the appeal of his passion. He longed with all his strength to hold her in his arms — every nerve in his body ached for her — yet he knew that because of this unconquerable instinct he was powerless to follow his longing.

"I don't think I deserve much, Molly," he said quietly.

She hesitated still, looking away from him in the direction of her path, which led over the meadow.

"Abel, be good to Judy," she said, without turning.

"I will, Molly, I promise you."

He moved a step toward the turnpike, stopped, and looked back.

"I can't do much for you, Molly," he said, "but if you ever need anybody to die for you, remember I'm ready."

"I'll remember," she answered, with a smile, but her eyes were misty when she passed the blazed pine and turned into the little path.

CHAPTER X

TANGLED THREADS

IN FRONT of Molly, the path, deep in silvery orchard grass, wound through the pasture to the witch-hazel thicket at Jordan's Journey; and when she entered the shelter of the trees, Gay came, whistling, toward her from the direction of the Poplar Spring. He walked rapidly, and his face wore an anxious and harassed expression, for he was making the unpleasant discovery that even stolen sweets may become cloying to a surfeited palate. His passion had run its inevitable course of desire, fulfilment, and exhaustion. So closely had it followed the changing seasons, that it seemed, in a larger and more impersonal aspect, as much a product of the soil as did the flame-coloured lilies that bloomed in the Haunt's Walk. The summer had returned, and a hardier growth had sprung up from the ground enriched by the decay of the autumn. He was conscious of a distinct relief because the torment of his earlier love for Blossom was over. There was no regret in his mind for the poignant sweetness of the days before he had married her — for the restlessness, the expectancy, the hushed waitings, the enervating suspense — nor even for those brief hours of fulfilment, when that same haunting suspense had seemed to add the sharpest edge to his enjoyment. He did not suffer to-day if she were a few minutes late at a meeting; and he disliked suffering so much that the sense of approaching bliss had never compensated for the pang of it. Her failures now merely made his manufactured excuses the easier. Once, when she had not been able to come, he had experienced a revulsion of feeling; like the sudden lifting of a long strain of anxiety. She still pressed for an acknowledgment of their marriage, while his refusal was still based on a very real solicitude for his mother. Only in the last six months had his feeling for Molly entered into the situation; but like all swift and unguarded emotions, it absorbed the colour in his thoughts, while it left both the past and the future in the cover of darkness.

"I wish you wouldn't wander off alone like this, Molly," he began as he joined her.

"Oh, it's perfectly safe, Jonathan — everybody knows me for miles around."

"But it would make mother nervous if she were to hear of it. She has never allowed Aunt Kesiah to go off the lawn by herself."

"Poor Aunt Kesiah," said Molly softly.

He glanced at her sharply. "Why do you say that?" he asked, "she has always seemed to me to have everything she wanted. If she hadn't had mother to occupy her time, what under heaven would have become of her?"

"I wonder?" she returned; "but has it ever occurred to you that Aunt Kesiah and I are not exactly alike, Jonathan?"

"Well, rather. What are you driving at?"

Her answering smile, instead of softening the effect of her words, appeared to call attention to the width of the gulf that separated Kesiah's generation from her own. The edge of sweetness to her look tempered but did not blunt the keenness with which it pierced. This quality of independent decision had always attracted him, and as he watched her walking under the hanging garlands of the wild grape, he told himself in desperation that she was the only woman he had ever seen whose infinite variety he could not exhaust. The mere recollection of the others wearied him. Almost imperceptibly he was beginning to feel a distaste for the side of life which had once offered so rich an allurement to his senses. The idea that this might be love, after all, had occurred to him more than once during the past six months, and he had met the suggestion with the invariable cynical retort that "he hadn't it in him." Yet only ten minutes before, he had watched Molly coming to him over the jewelled landscape, and the heavens had opened. Once more the unattainable had appeared to him wrapped in the myriad-coloured veil of his young illusions.

"Molly," he said almost in spite of himself, "what would have happened to us if we had met five or six years ago?"

"Nothing, probably."

"Well, I'm not so sure — not if you like me half as well as I like you. You understand, don't you, that I got myself tied up — entangled before I knew you — but, by Jove, if I were free I'd make you think twice about me."

"There's no use talking about what might have been, is there?"

The hint of his "entanglement," she had accepted quite simply as a veiled allusion to an incident in his life abroad. Her interest in it would have been keener had she been less indifferent to him as a lover, but while she walked by his side, smiling in response to his words, she was thinking breathlessly, like one hushed in suspense, "If Abel had only been like that a year ago, I should not have left him." That the qualities she had always missed in the miller had developed only through the loss of her, she refused to admit. A swift, an almost miraculous change had passed over her, and all the warm blood in her body seemed to rush back to her heart, giving it an abundance of life. The world appeared to her in a clearer and fresher light, as though a perpetual dawn were hanging above it; and this light shone into the secret chambers of her mind as well as over the meadows and into the shadowy places of the Haunt's Walk. "Yes, if he had been like that I should never have left him and all this would not have happened," she thought again; "and if I had been like this would he ever have quarrelled with me?" she asked herself the instant afterwards.

And Gay, walking at her side, but separated by a mental universe, was thinking resentfully, "The deuce of it is that it might just as well never have happened! If I'd only been a little less of a fool — If I'd only not walked my horse across the pasture that October afternoon — If I'd only had sense enough to see what was coming — If I'd only — oh, hang it!"

"I'd be a better man to-day if I'd known you sooner, Molly," he said presently. "A man couldn't tire of you because you're never the same thing two days in succession."

"Doesn't a man tire of change?"

"I don't — it's the most blessed thing in life. I wonder why you've given up flirting?"

"Perhaps because there isn't anybody to flirt with."

"I like that. Am I not continually at your service?"

"But I don't like your kind of flirting, somehow."

"What you want, I suppose, is a perpetual supply of Mullens. Have you seen him, by the way?"

"He called on Aunt Angela this morning and read a chapter from the Bible. I heard it all the way downstairs on the porch."

"And the miller?"

She was walking beside a clump of lilies, and the colour of the flowers flamed in her face.

"I saw him for a few minutes this morning."

"How has his marriage turned out?"

"I haven't heard. Like all the others, I suppose."

"Well, he's as fine a looking animal as one often encounters. His wife is that thin, drawn out, anæmic girl I saw at Piping Tree, isn't she? Such men always seem to marry such women."

"I never thought Judy unattractive. She's really interesting if you take the trouble to dig deep enough."

"I suppose Revercomb dug, but it isn't as a rule a man's habit to go around with a spade when he's in want of a wife."

With an impetuous movement, he bent closer to her:

"Look here, Molly, don't you think you might kiss me?"

"I told you the first time I ever saw you that I didn't care for kissing."

"Well, even if you don't care, can't you occasionally be generous? You've got a colour in your cheeks like red flowers."

"Oh, have I?"

"The trouble is, I've gone and fallen in love with you and it's turning my head."

"I don't think it will hurt you, Jonathan."

She broke away from him before he could detain her, and while a protest was still on his lips, ran up the walk and under the grape arbour into the back door of the house.

Left to himself, Gay wheeled about and passed into the side-garden, where he found Kesiah snipping off withered roses with a pair of pruning shears.

At his approach, she paused in her task and stood waiting for him, with the expression of interested, if automatic, attention, which appeared on her face, as in answer to some secret spring, whenever she was invited to perform the delicate part of a listener. She had attained at last that battered yet smiling acquiescence in the will of Providence which has been eloquently praised, under different names, by both theologians and philosophers. From a long and uncomplaining submission to boredom, she had arrived at a point of blessedness where she was unable to be bored at all. Out of the furnace of a too ardent youth, her soul had escaped into the agreeable, if foggy, atmosphere of middle age. Peace had been provided for her — if not by generously presenting her with the things that she desired, still quite as effectually by crippling the energy of her desires, until they were content to sun themselves quietly in a row, like aged, enfeebled paupers along the south wall of the poorhouse.

"Aunt Kesiah," said Gay, stopping beside her, "do you think any of us understand Molly's character? Is she happy with us or not?"

It is a pleasant thing to be at the time of life, and in the possession of the outward advantages, which compel other persons to stop in the midst of their own interesting affairs and begin to inquire if they understand one's character. As Kesiah lifted a caterpillar on a leaf, and carefully laid it in the centre of the grassy walk, she thought quite cheerfully that nobody had ever wondered about her character, and that it must be rather nice to have some one do so.

"I don't know, Jonathan; you will tread on that caterpillar if you aren't careful."

"Hang the caterpillar! I sometimes suspect that she isn't quite so happy as she ought to be."

"She didn't get over Reuben's death easily, if that is what you mean."

"I don't know whether it is what I mean or not."

"Perhaps her development has surprised you, in a way. The first touch of sorrow changed her from a child into a woman. No one ever realized, I suppose, the strength that was in her all the time."

Turning away from her, he stared moodily at Uncle Boaz, who was trimming the lawn beyond the miniature box hedges of the garden. Furrows of mown grass lay like golden green wind-drifts behind the swinging passage of the scythe, and the face of the old negro showed scarred and wistful under the dappled sunshine. June beetles, coloured like emeralds, spun loudly through the stillness, which had in it an almost human quality of hushed and expectant waiting. All Nature seemed to be breathing softly, lest she should awake from her illusion and find the world dissolved nto space.

"I wonder if it is really the miller?" said Gay suddenly. "The truth is her life seems empty of something."

"I beg your pardon?" returned Kesiah, startled, for she had been thinking not of Molly's life, but of her own. It was not much of a life, to be sure, but it was all she had, so she felt it was only natural that she should think about it.

"I said I wondered if it were the miller," repeated Gay a little impatiently. Like his mother he found Kesiah's attacks of inattention very trying — and if she were to get deaf the only position she had ever filled with credit would be necessarily closed to her. What on earth did she have to occupy her anyway if not other people's affairs?

"I can hardly believe that," she answered. "Of course he's a very admirable young man, but it's out of the question that Molly should worry her mind about him after he has gone and married another woman."

Her logic seemed rather feeble to Gay, but as he had told himself often before, Kesiah never could argue.

"I hear the fellow's come out quite surprisingly. Mr. Chamberlayne tells me he is speaking now around the neighbourhood, and he has a pretty command of rough and ready oratory."

"I suppose that is why Molly is so anxious to hear him. She has ordered her horse to ride over to a meeting at Piping Tree this afternoon."

"What?" He stared at her in amazement.

"Young Revercomb is going to speak at an open air meeting of some kind — political, I imagine — and Molly is going to hear him."

His answer was a low whistle. "At what time?" he asked presently.

"She ordered her horse at three — the very hottest part of the day."

"Well, she'll probably have sunstroke," Gay replied, "but at any rate, I'll not let her have it alone."

CHAPTER XI

THE RIDE TO PIPING TREE

A LOOK of surprise came into Molly's face when she found Gay waiting for her, but it passed quickly, and she allowed him to mount her without a word of protest or inquiry. She had been a good rider ever since the days when she galloped bareback on Reuben's plough horses to the pasture, and Gay's eyes warmed to her as she rode ahead of him down the circular drive, checkered with sunlight. Yet in spite of her prettiness, which he had never dignified by the name of beauty, he knew that it was no superficial accident of colour or of feature that had first caught his fancy and finally ripened his casual interest into love. The charm was deeper still, and resulted from something far subtler than the attraction of her girlish freshness—from something vivid yet soft in her look, which seemed to burn always with a tempered warmth. For need of a better word he had called this something her "soul," though he knew that he meant, in reality, certain latent possibilities of passion which appeared at moments to pervade not only her sensitive features, but her whole body with a flamelike glow and mobility. While he watched her he remembered his meeting with Blossom, and the marriage to which in some perfectly inexplicable manner it had led him, but it was not in his power, even if he had willed it, to conjure up the violence of past emotions as he could summon back the outlines of the landscape which had served as their objective background.

"Molly," he said, riding closer to her as they passed into the turnpike, "I wish I knew why we are going on this wild goose chase after the miller?"

"I'm not going after him — it's only that I want to hear him speak. I don't see why that should surprise you."

"I didn't know that you were interested in politics?"

"I'm not — in politics."

"In the miller then?"

"Why shouldn't I be interested in him? I've known him all my life."

"The fact remains that you're in a different position now and can't afford a free rein to your sportive fancies."

"He'd be the last to admit what you say about position — if you mean class. He doesn't believe in any such thing, nor do I."

"Money, my dear, is the only solid barrier — but he's got a wife, anyway."

"Judy and I are friends. That's another reason for my wanting to hear him."

"But to ride six miles at three o'clock on a scorching day to listen to a stump speech by a rustic agitator, seems to me a bit ridiculous."

"There was no reason for your coming, Jonathan. I didn't ask you."

"I accept the reproof, and I am silent — but I can't resist returning it by telling you that you need a man's strong hand as much as any woman I ever saw."

"I don't need yours anyway."

"By Jove, that's just whose, my pretty. You needn't think that because I haven't made you love me, I couldn't."

"I doubt it very much — but you may think so if you choose."

"Suppose I were to dress in corduroy and run a grist mill."

Her laugh came readily.

"You're too fat!"

"Another thrust like that, and I'll gallop off and leave you."

His face was bent toward hers, and it was only the quick change in her expression, and the restive start of her horse, that made him swerve suddenly aside and glance at the blazed pine they were passing. Leaning against the tree, with her arms resting on the bars, and her body as still as if it were chiselled out of stone, Blossom Revercomb was watching them over a row of tall tiger lilies. Her features were drawn and pallid, as if from sharp physical pain, and a blight had spread over her beauty, like the decay of a flower that feeds a canker at its heart. . . . .

With an exclamation of alarm, Molly turned her horse's head in the direction of the pine, but with a hasty yet courteous gesture, Gay rode quickly ahead of her, and leaning from his saddle spoke a few words in an undertone. The next instant Blossom had fled and the two were riding on again down the turnpike.

"She looked so unhappy, Jonathan. I wonder what was the matter?"

"She was tired, probably." He despised himself for the evasion, for his character was naturally an open one, and he heartily disliked all subterfuge. Yet he implied the falsehood even while he hated the necessity which forced him to it. So all his life he had done the things that he condemned, condemning himself because he did them. For more than a year now he had lived above a continuous undercurrent of subterfuge — he had lied to Blossom, he had deceived his mother, he had wilfully encouraged Molly to believe a falsehood — and yet all the time, he was conscious that his nature preferred the honourable and the candid course. His intentions were still honest, but long ago in his boyhood, when he had first committed himself to impulse, he had prepared the way for his subsequent failures. To-day, with a weakened will, with an ever increasing sensitiveness of his nervous system, he knew that he should go on desiring the good while he compromised with the pleasanter aspect of evil.

"She wouldn't speak to me," said Molly, "I can't understand it. What did you say to her?"

"I asked her if she were ill and if we could do anything for her."

"I can't get over her look. I wish I had jumped down and run after her, but she went off so quickly."

So intense was the sunshine that it appeared to burn into the white streak of the road, where the dust floated like smoke on the breathless air. From the scorched hedges of sumach and bramble, a chorus of grasshoppers was cheerfully giving praise to a universe that ignored it.

As Molly rode silently at Gay's side, it seemed to her that Blossom's startled face looked back at her from the long, hot road, from the waste of broomsedge, from the cloudless sky, so bright that it hurt the eyes. It was always there wherever she turned: she could not escape it. A sense of suffocation in the midst of space choked back the words she would have spoken, and she felt that the burning dust, which hung low over the road, had drifted into her brain and obscured her thoughts as it obscured the objects around her. When, after passing the ordinary, they turned into the Applegate road, the heavy shade brought a sensation of relief, and the face which had seemed to start out of the blanched fields, faded slowly away from her.

As she entered the little village of Piping Tree, her desire to hear Abel's speech left her as suddenly as it had come, and she began to wish that she had not permitted herself to follow her impulse, or that at the last moment she had forbidden Gay to accompany her. In place of the cool determination of an hour ago, a confusing hesitancy, a baffling shyness, had taken possession of her, weakening her resolution. She felt all at once that in coming to Piping Tree she had yielded herself to an emotion against which she ought to have struggled to the end. Simple as the incident of the ride had appeared to her in the morning, she saw now that it was, in reality, one of those crucial decisions, in which the will, like a spirited horse, had broken control and swerved suddenly into a diverging road in spite of the pull of the bit.

"I don't believe I'll stay, after all, Jonathan," she said weakly. "It's so hot and I don't really want to hear him."

"But we're here now, Molly, and he's already begun." Against the feminine instinct to fight the battle and then yield the victory, he opposed the male determination to exact the reward in return for the trouble. "It's over there in the picnic grounds by the court-house," he pursued. "Come on. We needn't dismount if you don't feel like it — but I've a curiosity to know what he's talking about."

Her fuss, of course, he told himself, had been foolish, but after she had made the fuss, he had no intention of returning without hearing the miller. Abel's ambition as an orator bored him a little, for in his class the generations ahead of him had depleted the racial supply of political material. The nuisance of politics had been spared him, he would have said, because the control of the State was passing from the higher to the lower classes. To his habit of intellectual cynicism, the miller's raw enthusiasm for what Gay called the practically untenable and ideally heroic doctrine of equality, offered a spectacle for honest and tolerant amusement.

"Oh, come on," he urged again after a moment, "we'll stop by the fence under that cherry-tree and nobody will see us."

As he spoke he turned his horse toward the paling fence, while Molly hesitated, hung back, regretted bitterly that she had come, and then slowly followed. In the cherry-tree, which was laden with red cherries a little over ripe, birds were quarrelling, and for a minute she could not separate the sound of Abel's voice from the confusion around her. Then his figure, standing under a stunted cedar on a small raised platform, which was used for school celebrations or out-of-door concerts, appeared to gather to itself all that was magnetic and alive in the atmosphere. Of the whole crowd, including Gay, the speaker in his blue shirt, with his head thrown back against a pitch-black bough of the cedar, and his face enkindled from the fire of his enthusiasm, seemed the one masculine and dominating intelligence. To Molly he represented neither orator nor reformer, but a compelling force which she felt rather than heard. What he said she was hardly aware of — for it was emotion not thought that he aroused in her.

"That's good!" said Jonathan quietly at her side, and glancing at him, she realized that Gay was regarding merely a picturesque embodiment of the economic upheaval of society. Judging the scene from Gay's standpoint, she saw that it was, after all, only the ordinary political gathering of a thinly settled community. The words, she knew now, were familiar. It was the personality of the speaker which charged them with freshness, with inspiration. What was it but the old plea for social regeneration through political purity — an appeal to put the dream of the idealist into the actual working of the State, since it is only through the brain of the dreamer that a fact may be born into the world.

"He can speak all right," observed Gay carelessly, "there's no doubt about that."

"I'd like to go, if you don't mind," answered Molly, and turning she rode softly away from the picnic grounds through the scattered hamlet, too small to be called a village. An old man, killing slugs in a potato field, stared after them with his long stemmed corn-cob pipe hanging loosely between his lips. Then when they had disappeared, he shook his head twice very solemnly, spat on the ground, and went on patiently murdering slugs.

"'Tis that fly-up-the-creek miller as they've come arter," he muttered. "Things warn't so in my day, so they oughtn't to be so now. I ain't got no use for anything that ain't never been befo'."

And in different language, the same thought was stirring in Gay's mind. "It's all stuff and nonsense, these hifaluting radical theories. There's never been a fairer distribution of property and there's never going to be."

They rode in silence under the flowering locust-trees in the single street, and then, crossing the grassy common, cantered between two ripening fields of oats, and turned into the leafy freshness of the Applegate road. The sun was high, but the long, still shadows had begun to slant from the west, and the silence was brooding in a mellow light over the distance.

"I don't know what we're coming to," said Gay at last, when they had ridden a mile or two without speaking. What he really meant, though he did not say it, was, "I don't know why in the devil's name you keep thinking about that fellow?"

Though his own emotions were superior to reason, he was vaguely irritated because Molly had allowed hers, even in a small matter, to assert such a supremacy. He was accustomed to speak carelessly of woman as "an emotional being," yet this did not prevent his feeling an indignant surprise when woman, as occasionally happened, illustrated the truth of his inherited generalization. A lover of the unconventional for himself, he was almost as strong a hater of it for the women who were related to him. It would have annoyed him excessively to see Kesiah make herself conspicuous in any way, or deviate by a hair's breadth from the accepted standard of her sex. And now Molly, with whom he had fallen in love, had actually flushed and paled under his eyes at the sight of young Revercomb! In some subtle manner she seemed to have stooped in his estimation — to have lowered herself from the high and narrow pedestal upon which he had placed her! Yet so contradictory are the passions, that he felt he loved her the more, if possible, because of the angry soreness at his heart.

Turning in the direction of Applegate, they continued their ride at a canter, and the afternoon was over when they passed the cross-roads again on their homeward way. A thin mist floated like thistledown from the marshes, which were so distant that they were visible only as a pinkish edge to the horizon. Large noisy insects, with iridescent wings, hovered around the purple, heavy scented tubes of the Jamestown weeds by the roadside, and the turnpike, glimmering like a white band through the purple dusk, was spangled with fireflies. Gay was talking as they approached the blazed pine, which stood out sinister and black against the afterglow, and it was only when Molly cried out sharply that he saw Blossom's face looking at them again over the tiger lilies.

"Why, what in the deuce!" he exclaimed, not in anger, but in amazement.

"Blossom, wait for me!" called Molly, and would have slipped to the ground had not Gay reached out and held her in the saddle.

Then the figure of Blossom, which had waited there evidently since their first passing, vanished like an apparition into the grey twilight. The pallid face floated from them through the grape-scented mist, and Molly's call brought no answer except the cry of a whip-poor-will from the thicket.

CHAPTER XII

ONE OF LOVE'S VICTIMS

A WEEK later Jim Halloween stopped with a bit of news at Bottom's Ordinary, where old Adam Doolittle dozed under the mulberry tree in a rush chair which had been brought over in his son's oxcart.

"Have you all heard that our Mr. Mullen has accepted a call to larger fields?" he inquired, "an' that Judy Revercomb has gone clean daft because he's going to leave us?"

"She didn't have far to go," observed Mrs. Bottom.

"Well, you'd never have known it to look at her," commented young Adam, "but 'tis a true sayin' that you can't tell the quality of the meat by the colour of the feathers."

"You'd better be speakin' particular, suh, an' not general," retorted old Adam, who was in a querulous mood as the result of too abrupt an awakening from his nap. "What you ain't known it doesn't follow other folks ain't, does it? Human natur is generally made with a streak of foolishness an' a streak of sense, just as fat an' lean runs in a piece of bacon. That's what I say, an' I reckon I ought to know, bein' turned ninety."

"All the same thar's some folks that ain't streaked at all, but a solid lump of silliness like Judy Hatch," returned his son.

This was too much for the patience of the patriarchial spirit, and old Adam began to shake as though he were suddenly smitten with palsy.

“What do you mean by contradictin’ me, suh? Didn’t I bring you into the world?” he demanded.

A reproachful shake of the head passed round the group.

“You oughtn’t to contradict him, young Adam. Ain’t he yo’ pa?’ said Mrs. Bottom, rebukingly.

“I warn’t contradictin’, I was talkin’,” replied young Adam, abashed by the evident disapprobation that surrounded him.

“Well, don’t talk, suh, until you can talk sense,” rejoined his father. “When a talker has turned ninety an’ can meet me on equal ground, I’ll consent to argue with him.”

His lower lip protruded threateningly from his toothless gums, while two tears of anger rolled slowly out of his eyes and over his veined and roughened cheeks to the crescent shaped hollow of his chin. So deeply rooted in his mind was the conviction that his ninety years furnished an unanswerable argument for the truth of his opinions, that the assurance of experience had conferred upon him something of that manner of superhuman authority with which the assurance of inexperience had endowed Mr. Mullen.

“I for one was al’ays against Abel’s marrying,” interposed Betsey with a placable air. “I knew she’d be a drag on him, an’ now that he’s goin’ into politics with sech good chances, the mo’s the pity. I’ve told him so time an’ agin when he stopped at the or’nary.”

At this point the appearance of Solomon Hatch caused her to explain hurriedly, “We were jest speakin’ of Abel an' his chances for the Legislature. You've got a mighty good son-in-law, Solomon."

"Yes," said Solomon, sourly, "yes, but Judy's a fool."

The confession had burst from an overburdened soul, for like Gay he could tolerate no divergence from the straight line of duty, no variation from the traditional type, in any woman who was related to him. Men would be men, he was aware, but if any phrase so original as "women will be women" had been propounded to him, he would probably have retorted with philosophic cynicism, that "he did not see the necessity." His vision was enclosed in a circle beyond which he could not penetrate even if he had desired to, and the conspicuous fact within this circle at the moment was that Judy had made a fool of herself — that she had actually burst out crying in church when Mr. Mullen had announced his acceptance of a distant call! He was sorry for Abel, because Judy was his wife, but, since it is human nature to exaggerate the personal element, he was far sorrier for himself because she was his daughter.

"Yes, Judy's a fool," he repeated angrily, and there was a bitter comfort in the knowledge that he had first put into words the thought that had engaged every mind at the ordinary.

"Oh, she's young yet, an' she'll outgrow it," observed Betsey as sincerely as she had made the opposite remark some minutes before. "A soft heart is mo' to be pitied than blamed, an' it'll soon harden into shape now she's settled down to matrimony."

"I ain't never seen a female with an ounce of good hard sense except you, Mrs. Bottom," replied Solomon.

"Thar's a contrariness in the rest of 'em that makes 'em tryin' companions to a rational critter like man, with a firm grip on his heart. To think of gittin' a husband like Abel Revercomb — the risin' man in the county — an' then to turn aside from the comforts of life on o'count of nothin' mo' than a feelin'."

"Well, it ain't as if she'd taken a fancy to a plain, ordinary kind of man," remarked Betsey. "Thar's somethin' mo' elevatin' about a parson, an' doubtless it's difficult to come down from a pulpit to common earth when you've once lifted yo' eyes to it. Thar warn't no shame about her cryin' out like that in church. They ought to have broke it to her mo' gently."

"I warn't thar," said old Adam, "but how did Abel conduct himself?"

"Oh, he jest got up an' led her out sort of gently, while she was cryin' an' sobbin' so loud that it drowned what Mr. Mullen was sayin'," replied Betsey.

"Thar ain't a better husband in the county," said Solomon, "accordin' to a man's way of lookin' at it, but it seems a woman ain't never satisfied."

"I'm glad I never married," remarked young Adam, "for I might have got one of the foolish sort seein' as they're so plentiful."

"Well, I never axed much bein' so unattractive to the sex," observed Jim Halloween, "an' as long as a woman was handsome, with a full figger, an' sweet tempered an' thrifty an' a good cook, with a sure hand for pastry, an' al'ays tidy, with her hair curlin' naturally, an' neat an' fresh without carin' about dress, I'd have been easy to please with just the things any man might have a right to expect."

"It's the way with life that those that ax little usually get less," commented old Adam, "I ain't sayin' it's all as it ought to be, but by the time the meek inherit the earth thar'll be precious little left on it except the leavin's of the proud."

"Thar ain't any way of cultivatin' a proud natur when you're born meek, is thar?" inquired his son.

"None that I ever heerd of unless it be to marry a meeker wife. Thar's something in marriage that works contrariwise, an' even a worm of a man will begin to try to trample if he marries a worm of a woman. Who's that ridin' over the three roads, young Adam?"

"It's Abel Revercomb. Come in an' pass the time of day with us, Abel."

But the miller merely shouted back that he had ridden to Piping Tree for a bottle of medicine, and went on at a gallop. Then he passed from the turnpike into the sunken road that led to the mill, and the cloud of dust kicked up by his mare drifted after him into the distance.

In spite of the scene in church, Abel had felt no resentment against Judy. He knew that she had made herself ridiculous in the eyes of the congregation, and that people were pitying him on account of her hopeless infatuation for the young clergyman, but because he was indifferent to her in his heart, he was able to look at the situation from an impersonal point of view, and to realize something of what she had suffered. When Solomon had railed at her after service, Abel had stopped him in indignation.

"If you can't speak civilly to my wife, you can leave my house," he had said sharply.

"Good God, man! Don't you know she's making a laughin' stock of you?"

"That's a lie!" Abel had replied curtly, and Solomon, with the craven spirit of all natural despots, had muttered beneath his breath that he "reckoned, after all, it must have been a sudden attack of sickness."

Of the attack and its nature Abel had said no word after this even to Judy. During that embarrassed walk out of church, while she clung sobbing hysterically to his arm, he had resolved once for all that, even though her behaviour cost him his ambition, he would never stoop to reproach her. What right, indeed, had he to reproach her when he loved Molly quite as madly, if not so openly, as she loved the rector? It was as if he looked on Judy's suffering through his own, and was therefore endowed with a quality of understanding which his ordinary perceptions would never have given him.

When he came in sight of the mill, the flash of red wheels caught his eyes, and he distinguished Mr. Mullen's gig in the road in front of the door. Having seen Judy as he rode by on his round of visits, the rector had stopped for a moment to inquire if she had entirely recovered her health.

"I was much concerned about her illness in church yesterday," he remarked, turning to the miller.

"I didn't know she was up," replied Abel, observing the inflamed and swollen state of her features, which had apparently escaped the notice of Mr. Mullen. "Oughtn't you to have stayed in bed, Judy?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, no, I'd rather be about," responded Judy hurriedly. "I came over from the house with a message for you when I saw Mr. Mullen passin'."

"I am trying a young horse of Jim Halloween's," said the clergyman, "my bay has gone lame, and Jim offered me this one for the day. Badly broken and needs a firm bit. I'm inclined to believe that he has never been put between shafts before, for I had quite a sharp tussle with him about passing that threshing machine in Bumpass's field."

"Oh, that roan's all right if you don't fret him," replied Abel, who had a poor opinion of the rector's horsemanship. "Stop jerking at his mouth, and give him his head."

But the Reverend Orlando, having drifted naturally into the habit of thinking that he had been placed here to offer, not to receive, instruction, appeared a little restive under the other's directions.

"I flatter myself that I possess the understanding of horses," he replied. "I've never had a disagreement with Harry, though I've driven him every day since I came here."

"All the same I'd keep a steady hand if I were going by that threshing machine up the road," rejoined Abel, who magnanimously refrained from adding that he had assisted at the purchase of Harry, and that the horse had been fourteen, if a day, when he passed into the clergyman's keeping.

A healthful glow suffused Mr. Mullen's cheeks, while he struggled valiantly to conceal his annoyance. He was very young, and in spite of his early elevation to a position of spiritual leadership, he remained after all merely an ordinary mortal. So he stiffened perceptibly on the shiny seat of his gig, and gave a sharp pull at the reins, which wrenched the head of the young roan away from a clump of sassafras.

"It is better for every man to follow his own ideas, don't you think, Mr. Revercomb?" he replied, advocating in his resentment a principle which he would have been the first to rap soundly had it been advanced by one of his parishioners. "I mean, of course, in the matter of driving."

"When do you go?" asked Judy suddenly, and turned her face away because she could not trust herself to meet his beautiful, earnest eyes.

"Within a fortnight. It is important that I should assume my new responsibilities immediately."

"And you won't come back ever again?" The meadows swam in a blur before her eyes, and she thought of the purple velvet slippers which would never be finished.

He was a kind-hearted young man, who wished well to all the world, and especially to those of his congregation who had profited spiritually by his sermons. If he had suspected the existence of Judy's passion, it would undoubtedly have distressed him — but he did not suspect it, owing to a natural obliquity of vision, which kept him looking away from the world as it is in the direction of a mental image of the world as he imagined it. So, with an amiable word or two of regret that Providence had arranged his removal to wider fields, he drove on, sitting very erect and sawing earnestly at the mouth of the young horse.

"He's a first-rate parson, but a darn fool of a horseman," observed Abel, with the disgust of a good driver for a poor one. "You'd better go in and lie down, Judy, you look like a ghost."

"I don't want to lie down — I wish I were dead," replied Judy, choking back her hysterical sobs. Then turning suddenly into the mill, she sank against the old mill-stone on the wooden platform and burst into a fit of wild and agonized weeping. Her hand, when he touched it, was as cold as clay and as unresponsive to his.

"Judy," he said, and his voice was wonderfully gentle, "does it really mean so much to you? Are you honestly grieving like this about Mr. Mullen?"

If he had only known it his gentleness to her was the thing for which at times she almost hated him. The woman in her was very primitive — a creature that harked back to the raw sensations of the jungle — and nothing less than the exercise of sheer brutality on Abel's part could have freed her from the charm of the young clergyman's unconscious cruelty.

She looked up at him with accusing eyes, which said, "I don't care who knows that I love him," as plainly as did her huddled and trembling figure, clinging pathetically to the old mill-stone, as though it were some crudely symbolical Rock of Ages which she embraced.

"Is it because he is going away or would you have felt this just as much if he had stayed?" he asked, after a minute in which he had watched her with humorous compassion.

Raising herself at the question, she pushed the damp hair from her forehead, and sat facing him on the edge of the platform.

"I could have borne it — if — if I might have had his sermons every Sunday to help me," she answered, and there was no consciousness of shame, hardly any recognition of her abasement, in her tone. Like all helpless victims of great emotions, she had ceased to be merely an individual and had become the vehicle of some impersonal destructive force in nature. It was not Judy, but the passion within her that was speaking through her lips.

"But what good would they have done you? You would have been miserable still."

"At — at least I should have seen him, an' — an' been strengthened in my religion ——"

The grotesque, the pitiless horror of it struck him for an instant. That she was half distraught and wholly morbid, he saw from her look, and the sight awakened that indomitable pity which had served always as a medium for the biting irony of life.

"To save my soul I can't see what satisfaction you would have got out of that," he remarked.

"I did — I did. They helped me to be spiritual minded," wailed Judy with the incoherence of complete despair. If her infatuation was ridiculous, it occurred to Abel that her courage, at least, was sublime. From a distance and with brighter hair, she might even have been mistaken for a tragic example of immortal passion. The lover in his blood pitied her, but the Calvinist refused to take her seriously.

"Well, if I were you, I'd go in and lie down," he said, feeling that it was, after all, the best advice he could offer her. "You're sick, that's what's the matter with you, and a cup of tea will do you more good than hugging that old mill-stone. I know you can't help it, Judy," he added in response to a gesture of protestation, "you were born that way, and none of us, I reckon, can help the way we're born." And since it is easier for a man to change his creed than his inheritance, he spoke in the tone of stern fatalism in which Sarah, glancing about her at life, was accustomed to say to herself, "It's like that, an' thar wouldn't be any justice in it except for original sin."

Judy struggled blindly to her feet, and still he did not touch her. In spite of his quiet words there was a taste of bitterness on his lips, as though his magnanimity had turned to wormwood while he was speaking. After all, he told himself in a swift revulsion of feeling, Judy was his wife and she had made him ridiculous.

"I know it's hard on you," she said, pausing on the threshold in the vain hope, he could see, that some word would be uttered which would explain things or at least make them bearable. None was spoken, and her foot was on the single step that led to the path, when there came the sound of a horse running wildly up the road through the cornlands, and the next instant the young roan passed them, dragging Mr. Mullen's shattered gig in the direction of the turnpike.

"Let me get there, Judy," said Abel, pushing her out of his way, "something has happened!"

But his words came too late. At sight of the empty gig, she uttered a single despairing shriek, and started at a run down the bank, and over the mill-stream. Midway of the log, she stumbled, shrieked again, and fell heavily to the stream below, from which Abel caught her up as if she were a child, and carried her to the opposite side, and across the rocky road to the house. As she lay on Sarah's bed, with Blossom working over her, she began to scream anew, half unconsciously, in the voice of frenzied terror with which she had cried out at the sound of the running horse. Her face was grey, but around her mouth there was a blue circle that made it look like the sunken mouth of an old woman, and her eyes — in which that stark terror was still visible, as though it had been rendered indelible by the violence of the shock that had called it into being — seemed looking through the figures around her, with the intense yet unseeing gaze with which one might look through shadows in search of an object one does not find.

"Get the doctor at once, Abel," said Blossom. "Grandma says something has happened to bring on Judy's time. Had you two been quarrelling?"

"Good God, no. Mr. Mullen's horse ran away with him and Judy saw it before I could catch her. I don't know yet whether he is dead or alive."

"I saw him running bareheaded through the cornfield just as you brought Judy in, and I wondered what was the matter. He was going after his horse, I suppose."

"Well, he's done enough harm for one day. I'm off to Piping Tree for Dr. Fairley."

But two hours later, when he returned, with the physician on horseback at his side, Mr. Mullen's driving, like most earnest yet ignorant endeavours, had already resulted in disaster. All night they worked over Judy, who continued to stare through them, as though they were but shadows which prevented her from seeing the object for which she was looking. Then at sunrise, having brought a still-born child into the world, she turned her face to the wall and passed out of it in search of the adventure that she had missed.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT LIFE TEACHES

JUDY was laid away amid the low green ridges in the churchyard, where the drowsy hum of the threshing in a wheatfield across the road, was the only reminder of the serious business of life. And immediately, as if the beneficent green had enveloped her memory, her weaknesses were effaced and her virtues were exalted in the minds of the living. Their judgment was softened by a vague feeling of awe, but they were not troubled, while they stood in a solemn and curious row around her grave, by any sense of the pathetic futility of individual suffering in the midst of a universe that creates and destroys in swarms. The mystery aroused no wonder in their thoughts, for the blindness of habit, which passes generally for the vision of faith, had paralyzed in youth their groping spiritual impulses.

On the following Sunday, before leaving for fresher fields, Mr. Mullen preached a sermon which established him forever in the hearts of his congregation, and in the course of it, he alluded tenderly to "the exalted Christian woman who has been recently removed from among us to a brighter sphere." It was, on the whole, as Mrs. Gay observed afterwards, "his most remarkable effort"; and even Sarah Revercomb, who had heard that her daughter-in-law was to be mentioned in the pulpit, and had attended from the same spiritual pride with which she had read the funeral notice in the Applegate papers, admitted on her way home that she "wished poor Judy could have heard him." In spite of the young woman's removal to a sphere which Mr. Mullen had described as "brighter," she had become from the instant of her decease, "poor Judy" in Sarah's thoughts as well as on her lips.

To Abel her death had brought a shock which was not so much a sense of personal regret, as an intensified expression of the pity he had felt for her while she lived. The huddled figure against the mill-stone had acquired a new significance in the act of dying. A dignity which had never been hers in life, enfolded her when she lay with the accusing and hostile look in her face fading slowly into an expression of peace. With the noble inconsistency of a generous heart, he began to regard Judy dead with a tenderness he had never been able to feel for Judy living. The less she demanded of him, the more he was ready to give her.

"I declar' it does look as if Abel was mournin'," remarked Betsey Bottom to Sarah on a September afternoon several months later. "It ain't in the natur of man to mourn, an' 'tis mo' surprisin' in his case seein' he jest married her to get even with Molly."

"I don't believe myself in settin' round an' nursin' grief," responded Sarah, "a proper show of respect is well an' good, but nobody can expect a hearty, able bodied man to keep his thoughts turned on the departed. With women, now, it's different, for thar's precious little satisfaction some women get out of thar husbands till they start to wearin' weeds for 'em."

"You've worn weeds steady now, ain't you, Mrs. Revercomb?"

Sarah set her mouth tightly. "They were too costly to lay away," she replied, and the words were as real a eulogy of her husband as she had ever uttered.

"It's a pity Abel lost Molly Merryweather," said Betsey. "Is thar any likelihood of thar comin' together again? Or is it true — as the rumour keeps up — that she is goin' to marry Mr. Jonathan befo' many months?"

"It ain't likely she'll throw away all that good money once she's got used to it," said Sarah. "For my part, I don't hold with the folks that blamed her for her choice. Thar ain't many husbands that would be worthy of thar hire, an' how was she to find out, till she tried, if Abel was one of those few or not?"

"He al'ays seemed to me almost too promisin' for his good looks, Mrs. Revercomb. I'm mighty partial to looks in a man, thar ain't no use my denyin' it."

"Well, I ain't," said Sarah, "they're no mo' than dross an' cobwebs in my sight, but we're made different an' thar's no sense argurin' about tastes — though I must say for me that I could never understand how a modest woman like you could confess to takin' pleasure in the sight of a handsome man."

"Well, immodest or not, I hold to it," replied Betsey in as amiable a manner as if there had been no reflection upon her refinement. "Abel stands a good chance for the legislature now, don't he?"

"I ain't a friend to that, for I never saw the man yet that came out of politics as clean as he went into 'em, and thar ain't nothin' that takes the place of cleanness with me." In her heart she felt for Betsey something of the contempt which the stoic in all ranks of life feels for the epicurean.

At supper that night Sarah repeated this conversation, and to her astonishment, not Abel, but Blossom, went pitiably white and flinched back sharply as if fearing a second fall of the lash.

"I don't believe it! Mr. Jonathan will never marry Molly. There's no truth in it!" she cried.

Over the coffee-pot which she was holding, Sarah stared at her in perplexity. "Why, whatever has come over you, Blossom?" she asked.

"You haven't been yo'self for a considerable spell, daughter," said Abner, turning to her with a pathetic, anxious expression on his great hairy face. "Do you feel sick or mopin'?"

He looked at Blossom as a man looks at the only thing he loves in life when he sees that thing suffering beneath his eyes and cannot divine the cause. The veins grew large and stood out on his forehead, and the big knotted hand that was carrying his cup to his lips, trembled in the air and then sank slowly back to the table. His usually dull and indifferent gaze became suddenly piercing as if it were charged with electricity.

"It's nothing, father," said Blossom, pressing her hand to her bosom, as though she were choking for breath, "and it's all silly talk, I know, about Molly."

"What does it matter to you if it's true?" demanded Sarah tartly, but Blossom, driven from the room by a spasm of coughing, had already disappeared.

It was a close September night, and as Abel crossed the road to look for a young heifer in the meadow the heavy scent of the Jamestown weeds seemed to float downward beneath the oppressive weight of the atmosphere. The sawing of katydids came to him out of the surrounding darkness, through which a light, gliding like a gigantic glow-worm along the earth, revealed presently the figure of Jonathan Gay, mounted on horseback, and swinging a lantern from his saddle.

"A dark night, Revercomb."

"Yes, there'll be rain before morning."

"Well, it won't do any harm. The country needs it. I'm glad to hear, by the way, that you are going into politics. You're a capital speaker. I heard you last summer at Piping Tree."

He rode on, and Abel forgot the meeting until, on his way back from the meadow, he ran against Blossom, who was coming rather wildly from the direction in which Jonathan had vanished.

"What has upset you so, Blossom? You are like a ghost. Did you meet Mr. Jonathan?"

"No, why should I meet Mr. Jonathan? What do you mean?"

"Oh, he went up the road a quarter of an hour ago, that is all."

Without replying she turned from him and ran into the house, while following her more soberly, he asked himself carelessly what could have happened to disturb her. "I wonder if she is frettin' about the rector?" he thought, and his utter inability to understand, or even to recognize the contradictions in the nature of women oppressed his mind. "First, she wanted Mr. Mullen and he didn't want her, then he wanted her and she didn't want him, and now when he's evidently left off caring again, she appears to be grievin' herself sick about him. I wonder if it's always like that — everybody wanting the person that wants somebody else? And yet I know I loved Molly a hundred times more, if that were possible, when I believed she cared for me." He remembered the December afternoon so many years ago, when she had run away from the school in Applegate, and he had found her breasting a heavy snow storm on the road to Jordan's Journey. Against the darkness he saw her so vividly, as she looked with the snow powdering her hair and her eyes shining happily up at him when she nestled for warmth against his arm, that for a minute he could hardly believe that it was eight years ago and not yesterday.

Several weeks later, on a hazy October morning, when the air was sharp with the scent of cider presses and burning brushwood, he met Molly returning from the cross-roads, in the short path over the pasture.

"I thought you had gone," he said, and held out his hand.

"Not yet. Mrs. Gay wants to stay through October."

In her hand she held a bunch of golden-rod, and behind her the field in which she had gathered it, flamed royally in the sunlight.

"Did you know that I rode to Piping Tree to hear you speak one day in June?" she asked suddenly.

"I didn't know it, but it was nice of you."

His renunciation had conferred a dignity upon him which had in it something of the quiet and the breadth of the Southern landscape. She knew while she looked at him that he had accepted her decision once for all — that he still accepted it in spite of the ensuing logic of events which had refuted its finality. The choice had been offered her between love and the world, and she had chosen the world — chosen in the heat of youth, in the thirst for experience. She had not loved enough. Her love had been slight, young, yielding too easily to the impact of other desires. There had been no illusion to shelter it. She had never, she remembered now, had any illusions — all had been of the substance and the fibre of reality. Then, with the lucidity of vision through which she had always seen and weighed the values of her emotions, she realized that if she had the choice to make over again, she could not make it differently. At the time flight from love was as necessary to her growth as the return to love was necessary to her happiness to-day. She saw clearly that her return was, after all, the result of her flight. If she had not chosen the world, she would never have known how little the world signified in comparison with simpler things. Life was all of a single piece; it was impossible to pull it apart and say "without this it would have been better" — since nothing in it was unrelated to the rest, nothing in it existed by itself and independent of the events that preceded it and came after it. Born as she had been out of sin, and the tragic expiation of sin, she had learned more quickly than other women, as though the spectre of the unhappy Janet stood always at her side to help her to a deeper understanding and a sincerer pity. She knew now that if she loved Abel, it was because all other interests and emotions had faded like the perishable bloom on the meadow before the solid, the fundamental fact of her need of him.

"Do you still get books from the library in Applegate?" she asked because she could think of nothing to say that sounded less trivial.

"Sometimes, and second hand ones from a dealer I've found there. One corner of the mill is given up to them."

Again there was silence, and then she said impulsively in her old childlike way.

"Abel, have you ever forgiven me?"

"There was nothing to forgive. You see, I ve learned, Molly."

"What you've learned is that I wasn't worth loving, I suppose?"

He laughed softly. "The truth is, I never knew how much you were worth till I gave you up," he answered.

"It was the same way with me — that's life, perhaps."

"That sounded like my mother. You're too young to have learned what it means."

"I don't believe I was ever young — I seem to have known about the sadness of life from my cradle. That was why I wanted so passionately some of its gaiety. I remember I used to think that Paris meant gaiety, but when we went there I couldn't get over my surprise because of all the ragged people and the poor, miserable horses. They spoiled it for me."

"The secret is not to look, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. Jonathan never looked. It all depends, he used to tell me — upon which set of facts I chose to regard — and he calls it philosophical not to regard any but pleasant ones."

"Perhaps he's right, but isn't it, after all, a question of the way he's made?"

"Everything is; grandfather used to say that was why he was never able to judge people. Life was woven of many colours, like Joseph's coat, he once told me, and we could make dyes run, but we couldn't wash them entirely out. He couldn't make himself resentful when he tried — not even with — with Mr. Jonathan."

"Have you ever forgiven him, Molly?"

"I've sometimes thought that he was sorry at the end — but how could that undo the way he treated my mother? Being sorry when you're dying doesn't help things you've hurt in life — but, then, grandfather would have said, I suppose, that it was life, not Mr. Jonathan, that was to blame. And I can see, too, in a way, that we sometimes do things we don't want to do — that we don't even mean to do — that we regret ever afterwards — just because life drives us to do them — " For a minute she hesitated, and then added bravely, "I learned that by taking Mr. Jonathan's money."

"But you were right," he answered.

"To have the choice between love and money, and to choose — money?"

"You're putting it harshly. It wasn't money you chose — it was the world or Old Church — Jordan's Journey or the grist mill."

For a moment the throbbing of her heart stifled her. Then she found her voice.

"If I had the choice now I'd choose Old Church and the grist mill," she said.

There was a short silence, and while it lasted she waited trembling, her hand outstretched, her mouth quivering for his kisses. She remembered how eagerly his lips had turned to hers in the past as one who thirsted for water.

But when he spoke again it was in the same quiet voice.

"Would you, Molly!" he answered gently, and that was all. It was not a question, but an acceptance. He made no movement toward her. His eyes did not search her face.

They turned and walked slowly across the pasture, over the life-everlasting, which diffused under their feet a haunting and ghostly fragrance. Myriads of grasshoppers chanted in the warm sunshine, and a roving scent of wood-smoke drifted to them from a clearing across the road. It was the season of the year when the earth wears its richest and its most ephemeral splendour; when its bloom is so poignantly lovely that it seems as if a breath would destroy it, and the curves of hill and field melt like shadows into the faint purple haze on the horizon.

"If I could change it all now — could take you out of the life that suits you and bring you back to the mill — I wouldn't do it. I like to think I'm decent enough not even to want to do it," he said.

They had reached the fence that separated Gay's pasture from his, and stopping, he held out his hand with a smile.

"I hear you're to marry Jonathan Gay," he added, "and whether you do or not, God bless you."

"But I'm not, Abel!" she cried passionately as he turned away.

He did not look back, and when he had passed out of hearing, she repeated her words with a passionate repudiation of the thing he had suggested, "I'm not, Abel! — I'm not!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

TEARS blinded her eyes as she crossed the pasture, and when she brushed them away, she could see nothing distinctly except the single pointed maple that lifted its fiery torch above the spectral procession of aspens in the graveyard. She had passed under the trees at the Poplar Spring, and was deep in the witch-hazel boughs which made a screen for the Haunt's Walk, when beyond a sudden twist in the path, she saw ahead of her the figures of Blossom Revercomb and Jonathan Gay. At first they showed merely in dim outlines standing a little apart, with the sunlit branch of a sweet gum tree dropping between them. Then as Molly went forward over the velvety carpet of leaves, she saw the girl make a swift and appealing movement of her arms.

"Oh, Jonathan, if you only would! I can't bear it any longer!" she cried, with her hands on his shoulders.

He drew away, kindly, almost caressingly. He was in hunting clothes, and the barrel of his gun, Molly saw, came between him and Blossom, gently pressing her off.

"You don't understand, Blossom, I've told you a hundred times it is out of the question," he answered.

Then looking up his eyes met Molly's, and he stood silent, without defence or explanation, before her.

"What is impossible, Jonathan? Can I help you?" she asked impulsively, and going quickly to Blossom's side, she drew the girl's weeping face to her breast. "You're in trouble, darling — tell me, tell Molly about it," she said.

As they clung together in a passion of despair and of pity — the one appealing by sheer helplessness, the other giving succour out of an abundant self-reliance — Gay became conscious that he was witnessing the secret wonder of Molly's nature. The relation of woman to man was dwarfed suddenly by an understanding of the relation of woman to woman. Deeper than the dependence of sex, simpler, more natural, closer to the earth, as though it still drew its strength from the soil, he realized that the need of woman for woman was not written in the songs nor in the histories of men, but in the neglected and frustrated lives which the songs and the histories of men had ignored.

"Tell me, Blossom — tell Molly," said the soft voice again.

"Molly!" he said sharply, and as she looked at him over Blossom's prostrate head, he met a light of anger that seemed, while it lasted, to illumine her features.

"Blossom and I were married nearly two years ago," he said.

"Nearly two years ago?" she repeated. "Why have we never known it?"

"I had to think of my mother," he replied almost doggedly. Then driven by a rush of anger against Blossom because she was to blame for it all — because he had ever seen her, because he had ever desired her, because he had ever committed the supreme folly of marrying her, and, most of all, because she had, in her indiscretion, betrayed him to Molly — he added with the cruelty which is possible sometimes to generous and kindly natures — "It was a mistake, of course. I am ready to do anything in my power for her happiness, but it wouldn't be for her happiness for us to start living together."

Blossom raised her face from Molly's bosom, and the strong sunlight shining through the coloured leaves, showed the blanched look of her skin and the fine lines chiselled by tears around her eyes. Encircling her mouth, which Gay had once described as looking "as though it would melt if you kissed it," there was now a heavy blue shadow which detracted from the beauty of her still red and voluptuous lips. In many ways she was finer, larger, nobler than when he had first met her — for experience, which had blighted her physical loveliness, appeared, also, to have increased the dignity and quietness of her soul. Had Gay been able to see her soul it would probably have moved him, for he was easily stirred by the thing that was beneath his eyes. But it was impossible to present a woman's soul to him as a concrete image.

"I don't want to live with him — I don't want anything from him," responded Blossom, with pride. "I don't want anything from him ever again," she repeated, and putting Molly's arms away from her, she turned and moved slowly down the Haunt's Walk toward the Poplar Spring.

"I couldn't help loving you, could I, Molly?" he asked in a low voice.

Her face was pale and stern when she answered.

"And you couldn't help loving Blossom last year, I suppose?"

"If I could have helped, do you think I should have done it? You don't understand such things, Molly."

"No, I don't understand them. When love has to cloak cruelty and faithlessness, I can't see that it's any better than the thing it excuses."

"But all love isn't alike. I don't love you in the least as I loved Blossom. That was a mere impulse, an incident."

"But how was Blossom to know that? and how am I?"

"One can't explain it to a woman. They're not made of flesh and blood as men are."

"They've had to drill their flesh and blood," she replied, stern rather than scornful.

"I might have known you'd be hard, Molly."

When she spoke again her voice had softened. "Jonathan, it's no use thinking of me — go back to Blossom," she said.

"Not thinking of you won't make me go back to Blossom. When that sort of thing is over, it is over once for all."

"Even if that is true you mustn't think of me — because I belong — every bit of me — to Abel."

He stared at her for a moment in silence. "Then it's true," he said at last under his breath.

"It has always been true — ever since anything was true."

"But you didn't always know it."

"I had to grow to it. I believe I have been growing to it forever. Everything has helped me to it — even my mistakes."

She spoke quite simply. Her earnestness was so large that it had swept away her shyness and her self-consciousness, as a strong wind sweeps away the smoke over the autumn meadows. And yet this very earnestness, this passionate sincerity, added but another fold to the luminous veil of mystery in which she was enveloped. He could not understand her. Less than ever could he understand her when she tried to tear the veil away and the terrible clearness of her soul blinded his sight. Therein lay her charm for him — he could never reach her, could never possess her even should she seek to approach him. Behind the mystery of darkness which he might penetrate, there was still the mystery of light.

"If you really care about him like that I don't see why you gave him up and went away from him," he said helplessly. "You wanted to go. Nobody urged you. It was your own choice."

"Yes, that's what you could never understand. I wasn't really going away from him when I went. I was going to him. It was a long and a roundabout road, but it was safer."

"You mean it brought you back in the end?"

"It not only brought me back, it showed me things by the way. It made me understand about you and Blossom."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, and was silent. The pang of his loss was swallowed up in the amplitude of his wonder.

"Are you going to marry him, Molly?" he asked when the silence had become unbearable.

"If he wants me. I'm not quite sure that he wants me. I know he loves me," she added, "but that isn't just the same."

He did not answer, and they stood looking beyond the thick foliage in the Haunt's Walk, to the meadows, over which a golden haze shimmered as though it were filled with the beating of invisible wings.

"Molly," he said suddenly. "Shall I go after Blossom?"

Her face grew soft and tender, like the happy face of a child.

"Oh, if you would, dear Jonathan," she answered.

Without a word, he turned from her and walked rapidly down the path Blossom had followed.

When he had disappeared, Molly went up the walk to the Italian garden, and then ascending the front steps, passed into the drawing-room, where Kesiah and Mrs. Gay sat in the glow of a cedar fire, reading a new life of Lord Byron.

Kesiah's voice, droning monotonously like the loud hum of bees, rose above the faint crackling of the logs, on which Mrs. Gay had fixed her soft, unfathomable eyes, while she reconstructed, after the habit of her imagination, certain magnificent adventures in the poet's life.

"Have you seen Jonathan, Molly?" asked Kesiah, laying aside her book while Mrs. Gay wiped her eyes.

"Yes, I left him in the Haunt's Walk."

"He has not seemed well of late," said Mrs. Gay softly, "I am trying to persuade him to leave us and go back to Europe."

"He is anxious about your health and doesn't like to go so far away from you," replied Molly, sitting on an ottoman beside her chair.

Taking her hand, Mrs. Gay caressed it while she answered.

"I can never think of myself when Jonathan's happiness is to be considered." Then dropping her voice still lower, she added tenderly, "You are a great comfort to me, dear, a very great comfort."

What she meant, and Molly grasped her meaning as distinctly as if she had put it into words, was that she was comforted, she was reassured by the girl's obvious indifference to Jonathan's passion. Like many persons of a sentimental turn of mind, she found no great difficulty in reconciling a visionary romanticism with a very practical regard for the more substantial values of life.

"I should never allow the question of my health to interfere with Jonathan's plans," she repeated, while her expression grew angelic in the light of her sacrificial fervour.

"I don't think he wants to go," retorted Kesiah rather snappily, and opening the book again she began to read.

For an hour her voice droned steadily in the firelight, while Molly, with her head against Mrs. Gay's knee, looked through the casement window to where the October roses bloomed and dropped in the squares of the Italian garden. Then at the sound of hurried footsteps on the walk outside, the girl rose from the ottoman and went out, closing the door after her. In the hall the blanched face of

Uncle Abednego confronted her like the face of a spectre.

"I ain't a-gwine ter tell Miss Angela — I ain't a-gwine ter tell Miss Angela," he moaned, "Marse Jonathan, he's been shot down yonder at Poplar Spring des like Ole Marster!"

CHAPTER XV

GAY DISCOVERS HIMSELF

As Gay passed rapidly down the Haunt's Walk a rustle in the witch-hazel bushes accompanied him, stopping instantly when he stopped, and beginning again when he moved, as though something, crouching there, listened in breathless suspense for the fall of his footsteps. At the Poplar Spring the sound grew so distinct that he hastened in the direction of it, calling in an impatient voice, "Blossom! Are you there, Blossom?" The words were still on his lips, when a thick grape-vine parted in front of him, and the bearded immobile face of Abner Revercomb looked out at him, with hatred in the eyes.

"Damn you!" said a voice almost in a whisper. The next instant a shot rang out, and Gay stumbled forward as though he had tripped over the underbrush, while his gun, slipping from his shoulder, discharged its load into the air. His first confused impression was that he had knocked against a poplar bough which had struck him sharply in the side. Then, as a small drift of smoke floated toward him, he thought in surprise, "I'm shot. By Jove, that's what it means — I'm shot." At the instant, underlying every other sensation or idea, there was an ironic wonder that anybody should have hated him enough to shoot him. But while the wonder was still engrossing him — in that same instant, which seemed to cover an eternity, when the shot rang in his ears, something happened in his brain, and he staggered through the curtain of grape-vine and sank down, as though falling asleep, on the bed of life-everlasting. "It's ridiculous that anybody should want to shoot me," he thought, while the little round yellow sun dwindled smaller and smaller until a black cloud obscured it.

A minute, or an hour afterwards, he opened his eyes with a start, and lay staring up at the sky, where a flock of swallows drifted like smoke in the cloudless blue. He had awakened to an odd sensation of floating downward on a current that was too strong for him; and though he knew that the idea was absurd, it was impossible for him to put it out of his mind, for when he made an effort to do so, he felt that he was slipping again into oblivion. For a time he let himself drift helplessly like a leaf on the stream. Then, seized by a sudden terror of the gulf beyond, he tried to stop, to hold back, to catch at something — at anything — that would check the swiftness of his descent, that would silence the rushing sound of the river about him. But in spite of his struggles, this current — which seemed sometimes to flow from a wound in his side, and sometimes to be only the watery rustle of the aspens in the graveyard — this imaginary yet pitiless current, bore him always farther away from the thing to which he was clinging — from this thing which he could not let go because it was himself — because it had separated and distinguished him from all other persons and objects in the universe. "I've always believed I was one person," he thought, "but I am a multitude.

There are at least a million of me — and any one of them might have crowded out all the others if he'd got a chance." A swift and joyous surprise held him for a moment, as though he were conscious for the first time of dormant possibilities in himself which he had never suspected. "Why didn't I know this before?" he asked, like one who stumbles by accident upon some simple and yet illuminating fact of nature. "All this has been in me all the time, but nobody told me. I might just as well have been any of these other selves as the one I am." The noise of the river began in his head again, but it no longer frightened him.

"It's only the hum of bees in the meadow," he said after a minute, "and yet it fills the universe as if it were the sound of a battle. And now I've forgotten what I was thinking about. It was very important, but I shall never remember it." He closed his eyes, while the ghostly fragrance of the life-everlasting on which he was lying rose in a cloud to envelop him. Something brushed his face like the touch of wings, and looking up he saw that it was a golden leaf which had fallen from a bough of the great poplar above him. He had never seen anything in his life so bright as that golden bough that hung over him, and when he gazed through it, he saw that the sky was bluer than he had ever imagined that it could be, and that everything at which he looked had not only this quality of intense, of penetrating brightness, but appeared transparent, with a luminous transparency which seemed a veil spread over something that was shining beyond it. "I wonder if I'm dead?" he thought irritably, "or is it only delirium? And if I am dead, it really doesn't matter — an idiot could see through anything so thin as this."

Again the cloud closed over him, and again just as suddenly it lifted and the joyous surprise awoke in his mind. He remembered feeling the same sensation in his boyhood, when he had walked one morning at sunrise on a strange road, and had wondered what would happen when he turned a long curve he was approaching. And it seemed to him now as then, that a trackless, a virgin waste of experience surrounded him — that he was in the midst of an incalculable vastness of wonder and delight. It was a nuisance to have this web of flesh wrapping about him, binding his limbs, hindering his efforts, stifling his breath.

And then, as in the brain of a fevered and delirious man, this impression vanished as inexplicably as it had come. His ideas were perfectly independent of his will. He could neither recover one that he had lost nor summon a fresh one from the border of obscurity that surrounded a centre of almost intolerable brightness into which his mental images glided as into a brilliantly lighted chamber. Into this brightness a troop of hallucinations darted suddenly like a motley and ill-assorted company of players. He saw first a grotesque and indistinct figure, which he discerned presently to be the goblin his nurse had used to frighten him in his infancy; then the face of his uncle, the elder Jonathan Gay, with his restless and suffering look; and after this the face of Kesiah, wearing her deprecating expression, which said: "It isn't really my fault that I couldn't change things"; and then the faces of women he had seen but once, or passed in the street and remembered; and in the midst of these crowding faces, the scarred and ravaged face of an old crossing-sweeper on a windy corner in Paris. . . . "I wish they'd leave me alone," he thought, with the helplessness of delirium, "I wish they'd keep away and leave me alone." He wanted to drive these hallucinations from his brain, and to recapture the exhilarating sense of discovery he had lost the minute before, but because he sought it, in some unimaginable way, it continued to elude him. The loud hum of bees in the Indian summer confused him, and he thought impatiently that if it would only cease for an instant, his mind might clear again, and he might think things out — that he might even remember the important things he had forgotten. "Abner Revercomb shot me," he said aloud. "I don't know much. I don't know whether I am alive or dead. All I am certain of is that it doesn't matter in the least — that it's too small a fact to make any fuss about. It's all so small — the whole blamed thing isn't any more important than those bees humming out there in the meadow. And I might as well have developed into any one of my other selves. What were all those seeds of possibilities for if they never came to anything? Why, I might have been a hero — it was in me all the time — I might even have been a god."

Then for the first time he became aware of his body as of something outside of himself — something that had been tacked on to him. He felt all at once that his feet were as heavy as logs — that they were benumbed, that they had fallen asleep, and were filled with the sharp pricking of thorns. Yet he had no control over them; he could not move them, could hardly even think of them as belonging to himself. This sensation of numbness began slowly to crawl upward like some gigantic insect. He knew it would reach his knees and then pass on to his waist, but the knowledge gave him no power to prevent its coming, and when he tried to will his hand to move, it refused to obey the action of his brain.

"I'm really out of my head," he thought, and the next instant, "or, it's all a dream, and I've been only a dream from the beginning."

A century afterwards, he opened his eyes and saw a face bending over him, which seemed as if it were of gossamer, so vague and shadowy it looked beside the images of his delirium. An excited and eager humming was in his ears, but he could not tell whether it was the voices of human beings or the loud music of the bees in the meadow. From his waist down he could feel nothing, not even the crawling of the gigantic insect, but the rest of his body was a single throbbing pain, a pain so intense that it seemed to drag him back from the gulf of darkness into which he was drifting.

"Can you hear?" asked a voice from out the hum of sound, speaking in the clear, high tone one uses to a deaf man.

Another voice, he was not sure whether it was his own or a stranger's — repeated from a distance, "Can I hear?"

"Did you see who shot you?" said the first voice.

And the second voice repeated after it: "Did I see who shot me?"

"Was it Abner Revercomb?" asked the first voice.

He knew then what they meant, and suddenly he began to think lucidly and rapidly like a person under the mental pressure of strong excitement or of alcohol. Everything showed distinctly to him, and he saw with this wonderful distinctness, that it made no difference whether it was Abner Revercomb or one of his own multitude of selves that had shot him. It made no difference — nothing mattered except to regain that ineffable sense of approaching discovery which he had lost.

"Was it Abner Revercomb?" said the first voice more loudly.

He was conscious now of himself and of his surroundings, and there was no uncertainty, no hesitation in his answer.

"It was an accident. I shot myself," he said, and after a moment he added almost angrily, "Why should anybody shoot me? It would be ridiculous."

It was there again — the unexplored, the incalculable vastness. If they would only leave him alone he might recover it before it eluded him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE END

In the middle of the afternoon Molly went into the spare room in the west wing, and stopped beside the high white bed on which Gay was lying, with the sheet turned down from his face. In death his features wore a look of tranquil brightness, of arrested energy, as if he had paused suddenly for a brief space, and meant to rise and go on again about the absorbing business of living. The windows were open, and through the closed shutters floated a pale greenish light and the sound of dead leaves rustling softly in the garden.

She had hardly entered before the door opened noiselessly again, and Kesiah came in bringing some white roses in a basket. Drawing a little away, Molly watched her while she arranged the flowers with light and guarded movements, as if she were afraid of disturbing the sleeper. Of what was she thinking? the girl wondered. Was she grieving for her lost youth, with its crushed possibilities of happiness, or for the rich young life before her, which had left its look of arrested energy still clinging to the deserted features? Was she saddened by the tragic mystery of Death or by the more poignant, the more inscrutable mystery of Life? Did she mourn all the things that had not been that did not matter, or all the things that had been that mattered even less?

Lifting her eyes from Kesiah's face, she fixed them on a small old picture of the elder Jonathan, which hung under a rusty sword above the bed. For the first time there came to her an impulse of compassion for the man who was her father. Perhaps he, also, had suffered because life had driven him to do the things that he hated — perhaps he, also, had had his secret chamber in which his spirit was crucified? With the thought something in her heart, which was like a lump of ice, melted suddenly, and she felt at peace. "Because I've lived," she said softly to herself, "I can understand."

And on the opposite side of the bed, between the long white curtains, Kesiah was thinking, "Because I've never lived, but have stood apart and watched life, I can understand."

Turning away presently, Molly went to the door, where she stood waiting until the elder woman joined her.

"Is Mr. Chamberlayne still with Aunt Angela?" she asked.

"Yes. He was on his way to visit her when Cephus met him near the cross-roads." For an instant she paused to catch her breath, and then added softly, "Angela is bearing it beautifully."

Stooping over, she picked up a few scattered rose leaves from the threshold and dropped them into the empty basket, before she followed Molly down the hall of the west wing to the lattice door, which opened on the side-garden. Here the rustling of dead leaves grew louder, and faint scents of decay and mould were wafted through the evanescent beauty of the Indian summer.

While they stood there, Mr. Chamberlayne came down the staircase, wiping his eyes, which were very red, on his white silk handkerchief.

"She bears it beautifully, just as we might have expected," he said. "I have seldom witnessed such fortitude, such saintly resignation to what she feels to be the will of God."

Molly's eyes left his face and turned to the purple and gold of the meadows, where webs of silver thistledown were floating over the path she had trodden only a few hours ago. Nothing had changed in the landscape — the same fugitive bloom was on the fields, the same shadows were on the hillside, the same amber light was on the turnpike. She thought of many things in that instant, but beneath them all, like an undercurrent, ran the knowledge that Mrs. Gay was "bearing it beautifully" behind her closed shutters. When her mind went back to the past, she remembered the elder Jonathan, who had perished in the fine silken mesh of the influence he was powerless to break. After this came the memory of the day when Janet Merryweather had flung herself on the mercy of that gentle heart, and had found it iron. And then she thought of the son, who had drifted into deceit and subterfuge because he was not strong enough to make war on a thing so helpless. He, also, had died because he dared not throw off that remorseless tyranny of weakness. Without that soft yet indomitable influence, he would never have lied in the beginning, would never have covered his faithlessness with the hypocrisy of duty.

"You have been a great comfort to her, Mr. Chamberlayne," said Kesiah, breaking the silence at last.

A low sound, half a sob, half a sigh, escaped the lawyer's lips. "A spirit like hers needs no other prop than her Creator," he replied.

"It is when one expects her to break down that she shows her wonderful fortitude," added Kesiah.

"Her consolation now is the thought that she never considered either her health or her happiness where her son was concerned," pursued the old man. "She clings pathetically to the memory that she urged him to return to Europe, and that he chose to remain a few weeks for the pleasure of hunting. Not a breath stains the purity of her utter selflessness. To witness such spiritual beauty is a divine inspiration."

For the last few hours, ever since a messenger had met him, half way on the Applegate road, with the news of Jonathan's death, he had laboured philosophically to reconcile such a tragedy with his preconceived belief that he inhabited the best of all possible worlds. Only when suffering obtruded brutally into his immediate surroundings, was it necessary for him to set about resolving the problem of existence — for, like most hereditary optimists, he did not borrow trouble from his neighbours. A famine or an earthquake at a little distance appeared to him a puerile obstacle to put forward against his belief in the perfection of the planetary scheme; but when his eyes rested upon the martyred saintliness of Mrs. Gay's expression, he was conscious that his optimism tottered for an instant, and was almost overthrown. That a just and tender Deity should inflict pain upon so lovely a being was incomprehensible to his chivalrous spirit.

"Has any one told her about Blossom?" asked Molly.

Kesiah shook her head. "Mr. Chamberlayne feels that it would be cruel. She knows so little about Jonathan's affairs that we may be able to keep his marriage from her knowledge if she leaves Jordan's Journey a few days after the funeral."

"In spite of it all I know that Jonathan hated lies," said Molly almost fiercely.

"Our first thought must be to spare her," answered the lawyer. "It was her son's endeavour always, just as it was my poor old friend Jonathan's. If you will come with me into the library," he added to Kesiah, "we will take a few minutes to look over the papers I have arranged."

They moved away, walking side by side with halting steps, as though they were crushed by age, and yet were trying to the last to keep up an appearance of activity. For a minute Molly gazed after them. Then her eyes wandered to the light that shimmered over the meadows, and descending the stone steps into the side-garden, she walked slowly through the miniature maze, where the paths were buried deep in wine-coloured leaves which had drifted from the half bared trees on the lawn. Abel was coming, she knew, and she waited for him in a stillness that seemed akin to that of the softly breathing plant life around her. It was the hour for which she had hungered for weeks, yet now that it had come, she could hardly recognize it for the thing she had wanted. A sudden blight had fallen over her, as though she had brought the presence of death with her out of that still chamber. Every sound was hushed into silence, every object appeared as unsubstantial as a shadow. Beyond the lawn, over the jewelled meadows, she could see the white spire of Old Church rising above the coloured foliage in the churchyard, and beyond it, the flat ashen turnpike, which had led hundreds of adventurous feet toward the great world they were seeking. She remembered that the sight of the turnpike had once made her restless; now it brought her only a promise of peace.

Turning at the sound of a step on the dead leaves, she saw that Abel had entered the garden, and was approaching her along one of the winding paths. When he reached her, he spoke quickly without taking her outstretched hand. The sun was in his eyes and he lowered them to the over-blown roses in a square of box.

"I came over earlier," he said, "but I couldn't see any one except Mr. Chamberlayne."

"He told me you would come back. That was why I waited."

For a moment he seemed to struggle for breath. Then he said quickly.

"Molly, do you believe it was an accident?"

She started and her hands shook.

"He said so at the end — otherwise — how — how could it have happened?"

"Yes, how could it have happened?" he repeated, and added after a pause, "He was a fine fellow. I always liked him."

Her tears choked her, and when she had recovered her voice, she put a question or two about Blossom — delaying, through some instinct of flight, the moment for which she had so passionately longed.

"It was all so unnecessary," she said, "that is the worst of it. It might just as easily not have happened."

"I wish I could be of some use," he answered. "Perhaps Mr. Chamberlayne has thought of something he would like me to do?"

"He is in the library. Uncle Abednego will show you."

He put out his hand, "Then good-bye, Molly," he said gently.

But at the first touch of his fingers the spell was broken, and the mystery of life, not of death, rushed over her like waves of light. She knew now that she was alive — that the indestructible desire for happiness was still in her heart. The meaning of life did not matter while the exquisite, the burning sense of its sweetness remained.

"Abel," she said with a sob, half of joy, half of sorrow, "if I go on my knees, will you forgive me?"

He had turned away, but at her voice, he stopped and looked back with the sunlight in his eyes.

"There isn't any forgiveness in love, Molly," he answered.

"Then — oh, then if I go on my knees will you love me?"

He smiled, and even his smile, she saw, had lost its boyish brightness and grown sadder.

"I'd like to see you on your knees, if I might pick you up," he said, "but, Molly, I can't. You've everything to lose and I've nothing on God's earth to give you except myself."

"But if that's all I want?"

"It isn't, darling. You may think so, but it isn't and you'd find it out. You see all this time since I've lost you, I've been learning to give you up. It's a poor love that isn't big enough to give up when the chance comes to it."

"If — if you give me up, I'll let everything go," she said passionately. "I'll not take a penny of that money. I'll stay at Old Church and live with Betsey Bottom and raise chickens. If you give me up I'll die, Abel," she finished with a sob.

At the sound of her sob, he laughed softly, and his laugh, unlike his smile, was a laugh of happiness.

"If you go to live with Betsey Bottom I'll come and get you," he answered, "but Molly, Molly, how you've tortured me. You deserve a worse punishment than raising chickens."

"That will be happiness."

"Suppose I insist that you shall draw the water and chop the wood? My beauty, your submission is adorable if it would only last!"

"Abel, how can you?"

"I can and I will, sweetheart. I might even make miller's wife of you if it was likely that I'd ever do nything but worship you and keep you wrapped in ilk. Are you very much in love at last, Molly?"

The sound of his low laugh was in her blood, and while she leaned toward him, she melted utterly, drawng him with the light of her face, with the quivering reath between her parted lips. To his eyes she was ll womanhood in surrender, yet he held back still, as man who has learned the evanescence of joy, holds ack when he sees his happiness within his grasp.

"It's too late except for one thing, Molly," he said. If it isn't everything you're offering me — if you are eeping back a particle of yourself — body or soul —

it is too late. I won't take anything from you unless I take everything — unless your whole happiness as well as mine is in your giving."

Then before the look in her face, he held out his arms and stood waiting.

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